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OR,

The Terror from Headwaters.

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AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "CAPTAIN CRISP," "A
ROYAL FLUSH," "JUMPING JERRY,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"TRIA JUNCTA IN UNO."

"Empty talk is too cheap fer to be wu'th much, an' when you strike a critter that's e-tarnally blowin' his own bazoo, you kin sot him down as a no-good bag o' secon' han' gas."

"Them's my sentiments; meanin' no 'fense to present comp'ny," the stage-driver interjected, with a keen side-glance into the face of his present companion.

If there was a covert meaning to this speech, it passed unnoticed by the first speaker, who was "taking a sight" by the aid of a capacious flask, which he shortly after passed over to Joe Duncan, whose beat was from Empire City to Good Leather.

"Does ye jestice, too, pard," nodded the passenger, politely turning his head to avoid any appearance of noting how long the knight of the

"GIT THAR, YOU MOURNERS! TELL 'EM THE HOWLER'S COMIN', AN' YAR'S OUR VISITIN' KEERD! HOUGH-UGH-UGH-H-OOF!"

reins "held his breath." "Of all the botch-work natur' ever turned out, a two-legged gas-bag is the most triffin'est an' no 'count. I never yit come 'cross one that I didn't feel like takin' him by the two ends an' rammin' him together ontel somethin' bu'sted."

Joe passed back the bottle in grim silence, though he looked as though he was strongly tempted to say something. While free drink is cheap, it is not always without cost.

A modest man and a truth-lover himself, Joe Duncan had long since set down this red-headed passenger of his as the worst case of bare-faced mendacity and shameless gasconade his long career had brought him in contact with. That was bad enough at the best, but to have this audacious liar and blow-hard switch off into a sermon against the very sins in which he stood pre-eminent, was even more disgusting.

"The truth is mightier than a old cheese, pard, an' long's I kin keep my grip onto that, I ain't afeard to tell the hull world what I think an' what I know fer to be a fact. An' them what don't like my style kin muster up all thar frinds an' 'lations an' come an' see the old man! An' ef they ain't much more'n a full rijiment, I reckon he'll make it mighty interestin' fer 'em, too! Braggin' I hate wuss then the Old Boy hates holy water, but I never was whipped, an' I never 'spect to be, nuther! I'm a chief with a high-up C! The king-pin of Fighting Alley! A holy terror from headwaters! An' jes' a little bit the best man that was ever done up in a human hide!"

"Ef they was only a lamp-post hitched to one end an' a glass shade to the other!" muttered Duncan, with a sniff of supreme disgust.

This was breath spent in vain. If he hoped to abash the flame-topped braggart, Duncan was counting without his host. The sarcastic shaft glanced harmlessly from his armor of proof, and the mighty chief placidly added:

"I wouldn't tell ye this ef it wasn't writ on the phizamahog o' me so plain a blind man without eyes kin read it upside down. Time was when I used to travel *incog.*, as 'twere. When I tried to kiver my light over with a peck-measure to keep from blindin' them as chained to look up as I went by. When I done my level best to pass off as a common man. But, that's played out, long ago—wuss luck!"

"Must be monstrous hard—on them as travels with ye!"

"Count o' sore eyes—I know it," was the frank admission. "But think o' me! Think o' the misery o' lookin' fer fun an' never findin' it! Of listenin' to fool critters talkin' 'bout big chiefs who live 'way off yender, an' settin' out to find 'em, only to see the durned varmints fade an' fade away bit by bit as ye git closther to thar stamplin'-grounds, ontel they ain't even a shadow left to fight when ye git clean thar! That's whar the hard comes in, honey!"

"Some men is mighty lucky," muttered Duncan.

"That's what!" emphatically nodded the hero. "More times than I've got nails on the two ends o' me, I've bin fooled jes' that way. I can't find the chiefs I set out to look up. Whar they go is what gits me, but I do know they pull the hole in after 'em so slick they ain't even a smell left to guide a critter. 'Fun is my livin', an' the lack of it's makin' me poor—so poor that ef it keeps on in the same rut, durned ef I won't hev to kiver my pore ribs over with nettin' to keep the bugs out!"

"Funny I never hear tell o' ye afore this," dryly uttered Joe.

"When did your ears go back on ye, honey?"

"They're thar; neither cut off nor plugged up. Though I hev see'd the time when I wouldn't cry my eyes out ef they was missin' fer a bit."

"Hough-ough-ough-ugh-gh-h-oof!"

The red-headed passenger elevated his glowing nose toward the cloudless sky and gave vent to a prolonged, diabolical howl such as is impossible to even faintly portray through the cold medium of type. It was a cross between the blood curdling war-whoop of the red-skin and the bay of a bloodhound on a hot trail, spiced with the shrill, unearthly notes of a hungry coyote, and ending with the savage snort-sniff of a startled grizzly bear.

The spirited horses plunged and pranced with tossing heads and laid-back ears, requiring all the strength and skill of the veteran driver to keep them under control. From the interior of the coach came cries of angry surprise, mingling with words only partially distinguishable above the clatter of hoofs and rattle of wheels.

"Drop it, durn ye!" grated Duncan, flashing a single hasty glance into the face of his passenger. "Ef I hedn't my han's full, I'd cut it short with a—Stiddy, my prittys! learn to peddle, boys!"

"Good Lawd!" eagerly ejaculated the Howler. "Ef that's all that henders ye, gi' me the ribbons an' pitch in! I hain't had a bat on the ear fer so long I can't remember how it feels!"

"You drive! My team!" snorted Duncan, hotly.

"Long's they ain't nobody lookin', I don't keer. I ain't the least mite proud, honey, an' I hev see'd wuss-lookin' teams—in the bone-yard," placidly grinned the wandering knight.

He overshot his mark if he counted on driving Joe Duncan to assaulting him then and there. Joe knew that he drove the neatest team on that stage line, and this fact was so generally conceded that he could afford to laugh at the insinuation contained in those words.

"You kin use your paws better in keepin' that red gap shet, pard. You want to do it, too, onless you feel like hoofin' it the rest o' the way to Good Leather. This bearse ain't a manadgery wagon!"

"Ef I show my wisitin' keerd ag'in will you chuck me off?" eagerly cried the searcher for "fun," inflating his capacious chest and puckering up his bearded lips anew, only to be hastily checked by Joe.

"Don't—or they'll be a smash-up! Ef hosses ain't human, they can't stan' everythin'!"

"An' a chief can't fight a hoss, wuss luck! Pity them as drives 'em ain't got the same 'mount o' proper pride an' sperit! But what's the use? Ef I can't wake up a shindy, I kin shet my eyes an' dream over the past an' make b'lieve I'm fightin' 'em all over ag'in. An' still I'm Howlin' Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters!"

"The howlin' part ain't no lie anyway," growled Duncan, sourly.

A thousand times since pulling out of Empire City, Joe Duncan had cursed the perverse fates that gave him such a companion for the long drive. At first he cared little, taking Howling Jonathan for an ordinary specimen of the hard-looking cases which every mining section turns out. Under this impression he shared plug and flask with his passenger, feeling that it was all in the line of duty, all in a day's work; but he had not counted on such a steady stream of blowing and gasconade. And being a modest man, after his own standard, Joe Duncan felt that fate had played him a dirty trick indeed.

A good sample of the average "tough" was this "Howler" to the outward eye. But a little over the mean hight, he was broad-shouldered and muscular, with long arms and grimy paws that looked as though they might easily play the part of blacksmith's vise at a pinch.

His hair was thick and matted, of a brick-red hue. His full beard was close cropped, that on his cheeks and chin being plainly several months' growth shorter than his bristling mustache. His nose was short and curved like the beak of an eagle, glowing redly in the sun and shining as though freshly varnished. His eyes were small, keen and penetrating, of a clear steel-gray color.

His garb was rough and ready, consisting of heavy brown duck trousers, coarse boots and blue flannel shirt. On his fiery locks rested a dingy felt hat which had once been white or gray.

A broad belt of webbing encircled his waist, filled with fixed ammunition for the brace of heavy revolvers which rested on each hip. In addition he carried a long bone-handled knife in a leathern sheath.

"Then you never hearn o' me afore? Never hear tell o' Howlin' Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters?"

"This is one o' my unlucky days, ye see, stranger," significantly grinned the driver, unable to hold back the fling.

Howling Jonathan turned a keen glance upon him, but as a sudden start on the part of his still frightened leaders called for his entire attention, Joe Duncan was not required to encounter that gaze, nor to more fully explain his epigrammatic speech.

"That's all right, pardner," slowly uttered Howling Jonathan. "We'll call it a compliment, an' let it go at that; leastways ontel your han's ain't quite so full as they be now. I reckon I'll see you in Good Leather!"

"Ef some o' the boys don't rock ye to sleep fer lettin' off steam like you did a bit ago, mebbe you will. I lay over to-morrow thar."

The Howler gave a mighty sigh that seemed to fairly lift his person from the box.

"The boys won't be thar. They won't show up long's the Terror hangs out his sign in Good Leather. I know it, fer keeps! I kin feel it in my bones, honey. They're skitterin' off fer thar holes this very minuit, or my feelin's is no prophet!"

"I ain't bettin' that way. They's some mighty good leather in the gang, now I tell ye, stranger—mighty good leather! Ef you stum'le up ag'inst Iceberg Dave or Ugly Dan, you won't need a long-range spyglass fer to see the stuff they're made out of; onless you're nimble on the heels as you be with the clapper," nodded Duncan, with a smile.

"It takes jest two icebergs to git me down to fever heat, honey, an' then I'm ugly enough fer a hull rijiment o' Dan's," placidly retorted Howling Jonathan. "But it ain't my luck. I've got dust that whispers I won't find nuther the one nor the other in Good Leather when I git thar. Ef they don't run away they'll hev a fit or tum'le down an' break thar necks, jest long o' my crooked luck!"

"Waal, it's a mighty slow way to git rich, this drivin' bearse, but I reckon I kin scrape together a few ducats that says you can't bluff off either Dave or Dan—what say?"

The Howler elevated his ruby proboscis with a sniff of scorn.

"That ain't my sort, honey. It don't take money to lend me narve fer fun or fightin'. It's clean love, that money can't pay fer nor buy."

"Talk is cheap, shore enough!" grunted Duncan, again devoting all his attention to his team, more than ever convinced that Howling Jonathan was all wind.

For some little space Jonathan was content to maintain silence, and Joe Duncan was chuckling in his sleeve at the happy thought by use of which he had shut off a nuisance. But he counted without his host, as he quickly discovered.

"Them two's the king-pins as runs Good Leather, I reckon, pard?" uttered Jonathan, blandly, apparently none the worse for his decided set-back. "The high-muck-a-mucks, so to speak?"

"They keep thar end up level, anyhow."

"Pears like I've hearn tell of a still bigger toad in the puddle, though," thoughtfully added the Howler, rubbing his chin, his little eyes half-closed. "With a kunnel to his name, wasn't it?"

"Mallison, you mean, I reckon?"

"That's the name—Kunnel Joel Mallison. Big chief; speckilator; high-toned cuss; rolls in dust an' feeds his dogs ducats. That's him!"

"Could ef he wanted to, anyhow," grunted the driver. "Rich enough. Ef you want business, he's the one to go to. Ef it's fun, pure an' unadulterated, you want to hunt up Iceberg Dave or Ugly Dan. Wish you would. I've hearn you talk, an' I'd mighty like to see you act!"

"Ef you don't, it won't be fer my fault," was the quick retort. "I hearn tell of the sports of Good Leather, an' I'm come all this way jest fer to feel o' thar grain. Ef it ain't rotten or spoiled in the tannin', the camp 'll jest git up on its hind-legs an' yowl with pure delight to see the fun! I'm monstrous glad thar's three of the chiefs, fer of all things I do 'spise to hev the olds all onto my own side. Anytime I'd ruther hev 'em t'other end to; they's some credit in pullin' off a fight when everybody's bettin' the other way."

"I reckon you'd better begin with one at a time, stranger. They'll last longer, ye know. Course I don't mean to hint that you ain't ekil to all three, but—"

"Never mind 'pologizin', pard," laughed Jonathan, lightly. "It ain't at the fu'st glimp' that everybody kin make out the three o' us."

He chuckled anew as Duncan glanced at him with a puzzled light in his big black eyes.

"That's all right, honey. You don't know me nigh as well as you will afore you take your next trip. It's Howlin' Jonathan Hebrew that does the talkin' fer this crowd, but when it comes down to stiddy work on a pure business basis, then the Hebrew children gits in thar light an' skientific tetches. Shadrach, Meshach and To-bed-we-go! 'Try and jump on a unicorn!' Which is Latin fer three tied up in one bundle, or both ends an' the middle to luek ag'inst all at oncet!"

"Heap good joke, I reckon, ef a body could only tell whar the right place to laugh comes in," retorted Duncan, giving the enigma up, sourly.

"Never went through gradiuation, I reckon," and Jonathan beamed benevolently on the benighted mortal. "Never mind. You'll onderstan' what it means when you see us all mixed up in a free circus. I reckon you'll think they's a thousan', 'stead o' only the three twins!"

"An' them all legs, I bet a gold-mine!"

"Which is sarcasm," laughed the braggart, lightly. "But I fergive ye, honey. Fools an' babies an' ign'ant people is another crowd that goes all three in a bunch."

Again there was silence on the box. Joe Duncan, slow witted, thick tongued, had no retort ready, and was suddenly brooding over that uncomplimentary speech, the precise purport of which he was as yet unable to catch, while Jonathan appeared to be admiring the really romantic scenery about them. Not for long, however. His tongue was too active to need or take a protracted rest, and he broke forth anew:

"A pritty route fer road-agents to git in thar work on! Reckon you ain't troubled with 'em as bad as they be up-country?"

"Ef that's why you left up-country, then you've struck the wrong claim, stranger," snapped Duncan, but with a sharp glitter in his black eyes. "I never thought the day'd come when I wanted to see them critters bad, but it hes! I'd give a good bit ef we was headed the other way, with a good chunk o' oro aboard—durned ef I wouldn't, now!"

"Feard o' breakers ahead, eh?" grinned the Howler. "Ef you ain't dead sure o' your narves, better let me take the ribbons a bit, honey."

"You drive? My team?" snorted Duncan, indignant.

"It is a sort o' come-down, that's so, honey, but I'm not proud, as I b'lieve I told ye afore. Mebbe I could stan' it fer a bit ef I was to shet my eyes up tight an' bring my 'magination into play, hard!"

"You hev driv', then?"

"Driv' Hain't I? Why, honey, ef you was to see my old team—my sixteen-in-hand, all heads up an' tail over the dasher! Ef you could only see when I was in my glory over— Why, man, time was when I used to tighten my tires an' swell my wheels reg'lar once a day in blood! In the gore o' road agents which I run over when they tried to hold up my hearse! That was drivin', now you're talkin', honey!"

"Talk, I reckon!" sniffed Joe, in disgust.

"Now you drivers down this way, I've heard tell, never do nothin' more'n hold up your dukes when a agent happens to step out in the trail. Don't git mad, pard. I ain't sayin' only what I've heard say. It ain't quite that bad, I do reckon?" and Jonathan bent forward to peer into the face of the driver, his beaming countenance fairly running over with anxiety and sympathy for one vilely slandered. Duncan took it for earnest, and answered:

"Drivin' is drivin', an' a critter's wuss then a fool ef he tacks on fightin' fer which he ain't paid fer to his other duties. Stop? Waal, I only wish Cap'n Clean-up would jump out on us this blessed minit! I'd like to see you chaw 'em up, hide an' taller—so I would!"

"It would be wu'th seein', too, ef your eyesight is good, honey," was the placid response. "Less they was a dozen or more, it wouldn't last long. I ain't no hog, but the fu'st sight o' road-agents makes me powerful hungry, an' I hold a heap o' fodder, them times."

"No sech luck, goin' this way, though," and Joe Duncan actually seemed to regret that fact. "But I tell you what I'll do! I'll git you a job to drive my turn the next treasure-shipment. You'll hev solid chawin', don't you fergit it, now!"

"You're my mutton, honey, jest as soon as I clean out Good Leather," and Jonathan Hebrew nodded resolutely. "Business fu'st, an' fun after. But what makes you so sure this Cap'n Clean-up won't tackle us goin' in?"

"He ain't no fool," was the curt reply. "He lets everybody in, but when they tries to get out o' Good Leather, he talks, right sharp, too!"

The Howler laughed lightly as he reached down and slapped the top of his capacious boots.

"Mebbe he'd change his rule ef he only knowed what I know."

Joe Duncan followed the nimble hand with growing curiosity, which was quickly gratified, after a fashion, by the red-headed passenger.

"Got a di'mond mine in that hoss hide, an' a national bank in this 'ne? Putt them thar to keep my paws free fer fightin' an' sech like, ef any road-agents should happen by."

"I see 'em now!" grunted Duncan, speaking figuratively, but his words were caught up by Jonathan with ludicrous alertness.

"Whar—whar is they? How many—good Lawd!"

Then Joe Duncan did laugh, more than ever convinced that the Howler was far more wind than sand, for if ever mortal man looked unlike a man-eater, the red-haired passenger did just then. Not pale, for his complexion was by far too highly colored for that; but strongly agitated and glaring about them as he shrunk behind the burly figure of the driver, seemingly to shield himself from a bullet!

"In your mind, rather than your boots, stranger," grinned Joe, feeling better pleased than he had since pulling out of Empire City that early morn.

"Thought mebbe I'd drapped 'em out in the road," muttered Hebrew, brushing one dirty sleeve across his brow, smiling sickly. "That would be a pity, fer I meant to bu'st every bank in Good Leather wide open before I settled down to sport as is sport. Good Lawd!" with a sudden flashing up as Duncan laughed anew. "You didn't reckon I was skeered? You don't reckon I tuck you to mean road-agents?"

"You said it, stranger," chuckled Joe, in high glee, though he had felt all along that this was about what the blow-hard would amount to if ever caught in a crisis.

"That's all right, then," and the Howler settled back on his seat with a sigh of relief. "I'd hate to mount ye, an' you with your han's full, but I'd hev to do it ef—say no more honey," as Duncan ceased laughing and frowned as he turned his bluff face that way. "It was all a mistake, an' we ain't goin' to quarrel, we ain't! Old drivers, both o' us. Weterans, so to speak, an' pioneers in the hearse line. An' it mought skeer the insides of we was to come to war right over thar heads. Know any of 'em, honey?"

"One; an' ef you're huntin' up chiefs to conquer, mebbe you mought do wuss then to take a squar' look at him, come to think. He's a bit o' pritty good leather, too, I tell ye!"

"Got a name, I s'pose? Ef it ain't too much trouble, honey," with a bland grin, and deprecating wave of one grimy paw. "Ye see, I'm a stranger an' a pilgrim. I don't know many critters in these parts, an' I'd hate mightily to tackle the wrong pusson."

"Which is nine out o' ten, ef I hain't counted ye up wrong!"

Jonathan grinned, bowing cordially.

"You ain't one half the fool ye look, honey—no you ain't, now! It takes you to read a chief rightly, it does! But you put it too low, I

reckon; say ninety-nine out of a hunderd. That comes nigher the notch, but it's a mighty tight squeeze ef even that one won't be a under-match fer the triplets. They're holy p'izen from the mint when they gits all o' thar backs up in good airnest, they be!"

This was not what Joe meant, but before he could pick out the words he needed, the Howler spoke again:

"I don't reckon I jest ketched the name, pard. You said?"

"Frank Spartan," gruffly muttered the driver.

"It's a fightin' name, anyway," and Hebrew nodded his gracious approval. "Spar an' tan afterwards. I like it, heap good! But does the critter fit his name, honey?"

"Try him an' find out, you'd better," growled Duncan, still ruffled in mind and temper. "I want to be thar to see, I do! I'm open to bet it wouldn't take much sparrin', but thar'd be tan in heaps an' gobs!"

"Not unless he tried to putt on too many frills," deprecatingly added Jonathan. "I'm a holy terror when I git to goin', but I ain't the sort that jumps on a man that don't putt himself for'ard a heap. Ef the feller's a fri'nd o' yours, you needn't borry trouble on his a'count, honey."

Joe Duncan could stand no more. He was so mad that he could not speak quickly, but he acted. He placed his whip in the socket and slipped one foot on the brake, bunching the lines in one hand while with the other he unbuttoned his coat, his black eyes all the time fixed on the grinning face of the red-haired passenger.

"Gittin' hot, pard?" innocently queried the Howler. "Shell I hold the ribbons fer ye?"

"Hot ain't no name fer it, durn ye!" slowly uttered Duncan, his breath coming in short, hard puffs, his face turning whiter than it had been seen for many a day, his lips compressing, his eyes glittering as though a fire was kindling behind them and showing through.

"It is sorter warmish, ain't it?" drawled Jonathan.

"You'll find it wuss then that. You'll find it red-hot an' still a-heatin' afore I git through with ye. You'll find that I ain't stan' everythin' even ef I do drive a hearse fer—"

"The good Lawd! looky yender!" abruptly exclaimed Hebrew, all trace of mirth vanishing from his face as though by magic.

No need to explain his meaning, for, as he glanced mechanically in the direction indicated, straight ahead of them in the road, Joe Duncan saw something that drove all thoughts of fighting from his mind.

Out from cover leaped several horsemen, each one wearing the conventional disguise over his face, each one with revolvers drawn and ready for instant use in case of resistance. And sharp, menacing, peremptory came the two familiar words:

"Hand up!"

"Cap'n Clean-up, or I'm a howlin' liar!" spluttered Joe Duncan, as he threw his weight on the brake and tugged at the ribbons.

CHAPTER II.

THE HEBREW CHILDREN "GIT THAR!"

Clearly enough these were no amateurs, no new hands at the business, for, even as Captain Clean-up uttered his sharp challenge, two of the masked riders caught the lead horses by the bits, forcing them back almost on their haunches, at the same time covering the occupants of the box seat with ugly-looking revolvers.

Another brace broke cover on the right hand side of the road, while still a third pair spurred out into the road, cutting off all possibility of escape by flight, unless in the very face of their weapons.

"Hold up, dug-gone ye!" chattered Jonathan, in a husky whisper, as he drove an elbow into the ribs of the driver, whose hands were busy with his fiery wheelers. "Want to git us all massacred, don't ye?"

"Hold up she am, boss!" and instead of showing either fear or vexation, Joe Duncan fairly laughed aloud in pure delight. "Good Lawd! ef you only knowed how p'izen glad I be to see ye jest now!"

"Mind how you show your joy, old fellow!" warningly grated the masked chief, his revolver-muzzle shifting so as to cover the driver. "You're too old to play the ass, save at the expense of your health. You know me, I reckon."

So hard and merciless the tone that Duncan dropped the reins in his haste to elevate his paws. Still he grinned. If his life had depended on his keeping a sober face, he felt that he must have forfeited it. It was rich—the way in which the Howler drew in his horns and sat trembling on the box, ducking his fiery crest, wagging it from side to side as he strove to break the straight line drawn between it and the pistols gripped by the road-agents at the head of the leaders.

Little of the fire-eater there!

"Nigh hungry enough to begin, ain't ye?" he muttered barely above his breath, with a malicious side glance into the face of his passenger. "Grub a-plenty right afore ye, ain't they?"

Good Lawd! the most fun I've hed sence I fu'st got married!"

A sickly smile crept over the face of Hebrew, but he ventured no response. He had eyes only for those ugly muzzles in front.

"Hold them level, boys!" cried Captain Clean-up, apparently satisfied with the prompt obedience displayed by the two outside men. "If a grain of powder is burned, inside or out, riddle the hearse and make a clean, sure job of it!"

"We're the lads as kin do it, boss!" chuckled one of the masks.

"And you, Joe Duncan," flashing a keen glance up at the still grinning driver, whose unusual mirth clearly stirred his suspicions that all was not right, "want to hurry over your prayers if there's any trap set for us. You'll go down the first, dead sure!"

"Devil a trick, boss, only I'm so tickled I cain't—ugh!"

A sharp elbow dug into his ribs with a force that ended the sentence with a grunt, and Jonathan huskily muttered in his ear:

"I'll ha'nt ye from now tell never ef ye give me away!"

"So much the better for you and your freight, old man," and the road-agent chief uttered a short, hard laugh as he turned his eyes toward the door of the coach. "Act white, be sensible, and not a hair of your heads shall be harmed; but cut up rusty, and we'll turn that vehicle into a hearse in deadly earnest! It's Cap Clean-up who talks, my gentle pilgrims!"

Even more completely taken by surprise were the "insides" when the stern challenge of the road-agent rung out on the clear air, and for a few moments there was something akin to a panic among them.

Not a very extensive load, consisting of but four passengers, all of whom were bound for Good Leather, either to settle there or from it take departure in another direction.

Two were average specimens of the mining genus, or possibly prospectors, since they had not precisely the air of regular day laborers, to say nothing of their riding where fares came so high.

The third passenger was a tall, thin, sanctimonious looking sort of man, past middle age, with long hair and smooth shaven chaps. His suit of rusty broadcloth and limp white tie served to mark him as one "of the elect" in the minds of his fellow travelers.

The fourth inmate was of a different quality, as could be seen at a single glance, and beyond a doubt he it was to whom Joe Duncan had alluded as Frank Spartan, the sport.

Tall, athletic, without being at all heavily built, his graceful figure well set off by the neat business suit of clothes which he wore, Frank Spartan might have been taken for a man of property, a "drummer," a tourist for pleasure, or a gambler of the upper strata.

His face was as handsome as his form was perfect. Dark, with hair, mustaches and half beard of raven blackness. With eyes large and black, full and bright, now losing all traces of the quiet, almost sleepiness, which had filled them until the hard challenge of Captain Clean-up broke upon his hearing. With long, straight nose, full red lips, firm chin; with broad, high forehead, showing white and pure as the stiff hat was quickly pushed back from his brows; with neatly gloved hands which instinctively found a brace of revolvers which had, until now, been unseen if not unsuspected.

"What is it, gentlemen?" he hurriedly yet calmly uttered, his keen black eyes glancing swiftly from face to face as the coach came to an abrupt halt. "Fight or knuckle? I'm going with the majority this deal."

The tall passenger whom the rest had mentally set down as some sort of "gospel sharp," was too agitated to make an articulate reply. The others cast hasty, cautious looks out of the windows before uttering a word, unless the muttered curses which fell mechanically from their lips at the first alarm may be called such.

"It's a clean give-away, pard!" growled one, hastily pulling a small roll of bills from his bosom and crowding it into one corner of the coach.

"We'll hev to pass, I reckon, Jimmy?"

"That or be froze out, too quick!"

Frank Spartan readily interpreted these ejaculations, and with a short, careless laugh he replaced his weapon, knowing that if he fought he would be alone in his resistance to the road-agents.

"It's all in a lifetime, and nothing when you once get used to it, old gentleman," he said, lightly, his jetty eyes laughing at the comical contortions which the clerical personage went through with. "You'll come off lighter than the rest of us, no doubt, for Captain Clean-up takes all lambs at half-rates."

There was time for no more. Captain Clean-up was giving his sharp warning as already recorded, and now his good horse bore him to the side of the stage, the grim muzzle of a cocked revolver heralding his approach and first showing through the open window.

"That's all right, captain," uttered a cool voice, as a gloved hand quickly turned aside the muzzle of the weapon and the smiling face of

Frank Spartan showed at the opening. "We're lambs in here, every one of us, and you can sweep the board without a show-down."

"You, is it?" and there was something like startled satisfaction in the tones that came from behind that sable mask.

"At your service, captain," was the light reply, and Frank bowed with mock ceremony. "Sorry we can't make it any more interesting for you and the boys, but I go with the majority, and they said no good."

"Lucky for you too!" growled the road-agent, seemingly ruffled by either the words or that careless smile; they were so unlike what he was accustomed to meet when plying his profession.

"Think so?" and Frank Spartan lazily covered a slight yawn with his daintily gloved hand. "Luck it is then, for what you say goes."

There was a brief silence, during which the eyes of the masked outlaw seemed probing the dingy depths of the coach, passing from figure to figure lingeringly; their faces he could not see without thrusting his head clear through the window, and apparently he did not care to tempt fate too far.

Despite his seeming carelessness, Frank Spartan watched those eyes with growing interest, for this was hardly the fashion in which the renowned Captain Clean-up usually made his demands for toll. It seemed as though he was looking for some particular person, rather than bent on booty.

"Not a goat on the way-bill, captain, I assure you," he uttered, blandly. "Lambs, every individual of us!"

Captain Clean-up started back with a grating oath, his dark eyes glowing as though filled with fire, his voice harsh and vindictive:

"There's one wolf among you, at any rate, and he's my meat!"

"Be durned if it's me or pard Sam, anyhow!" quickly cried one of the prospectors.

"And I'm an humble laborer in the—"

"Let up, you!" grated the road-agent, sharply. "I'm doing the talking for this outfit just now. I know my game's aboard, and I'll have him in his true colors, if I have to flay the last one of ye! Step out and form in line, quick as your pins will let ye! I mean business now, and out you come, alive or dead meat. Take your choice!"

This was a sharp and disagreeable change, but the time for fighting was past. Four agents besides their chief had the stage under their pistols, while the two men at the heads of the leaders seemed more than sufficient to prevent the outsiders from chipping in.

"Business it is, captain," quietly uttered Frank Spartan, as he opened the door and stepped forth. "You can begin with me, if you like."

"You're all right," was the response, in milder tones. "You're a bit of a hawk yourself, though a little choicer in your picking. If I'd known you were aboard, though, I wouldn't have stuck my precious pate so near the fire!"

Frank Spartan bowed slightly at the compliment thus conveyed. As a tribute to his prowess, coming from such a source, it was not to be despised.

"You're all right," repeated the road-agent, keenly watching for the coming of the others, his revolver covering the door, though held with seeming carelessness. "You won't lose a dollar by us, this round. We're not out after toll—of the usual sort. Will you tumble out?"

"It's that durned hymn-book whanger!" came an angry voice from within the stage. "Down on his hunkers, tanglin' us all up with his long laigs—scat you go!"

There came the sounds of a confused scuffle, followed by the sudden ejection of the tall, gaunt passenger with much more speed than grace. He fell sprawling in the dust at the feet of Captain Clean-up, closely followed by the two miners.

Captain Clean-up lifted one hand, and as though in obedience to a signal, the road-agents, with the exception of those holding the leading span of horses, came up, leaping from their saddles and surrounding the passengers.

"You can step inside again, Spartan," coldly uttered the chief, turning to the sport who was watching the proceedings with interest. "I trust you will act as you are treated—white. I'd hate to hurt you, but if you interfere in this little game without being invited, you must take the consequences."

"That of course," was the cool response, as Frank stepped into the stage, drawing the door aside until he could have a free and unobstructed view of what took place outside.

His curiosity was awakened by the curious manner of the outlaw, and he was eager to see the outcome of it all.

There was little time cut to waste. Captain Clean-up dismounted from his horse, and while his men held the passengers under their weapons, he closely questioned and still more closely scanned his captives. Each one was searched, but not for the purpose of robbery, since all articles taken were promptly returned. And as each man was searched, he was sharply ordered to return to his place in the stage. First the two prospectors, then the tall man, a savage curse quickening the steps of the latter.

"I'll be the death of him if he sent in a false report!" came gratingly from behind that sable mask. "But he wouldn't dare—"

"Thar's one more, boss, up yender," ventured one of the outlaws, with a nod toward the box seat.

"They's heap more ha'r then wool 'bout him, but it smells more skunky then wolfish, boss!" chuckled Joe Duncan, as he twisted his body to give a better view of Howling Jonathan.

And then—
Two pistol-shots sounded almost as one, and with wild cries of agony, the brace of outlaws holding the leaders fell from their saddles and left the team free!

The Howler crouched down on the foot-board, clutching the reins with one hand, plying the long lash with the other, a wild, unearthly howl bursting from his lips as the frightened horses plunged madly forward!

"Hough-ough-gh-h-oof!"

All with the speed of thought. All so sudden that before even keen-witted Captain Clean-up could suspect mischief, the stage was rolling away at the full speed of four good steeds, two of his men were writhing in death-agony beside the trail, that hideous howl was awaking a thousand weird echoes among the hills, blending with a shrill, mocking laugh that came over the top of the stage as a fiery head shot up just long enough to send a bullet hissing on its mission.

"Yar's your wolf, boss!" recklessly yelled Jonathan as he discharged the shot, laughing triumphantly as he saw the road-agent chief stagger and almost fall, saved by being caught in the arms of one of his men. "A thousand fangs, an' every one a foot long, tipped with rankest pizen! That's me—Howlin' Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters!"

"Kill him! take him, dead or alive!" grated Captain Clean-up, staggering erect and jerking forth a revolver, sending bullet after bullet up the road, only to see that red head duck under cover as the deftly plied whip sent forth reports almost equalling those of the revolver.

"You Joe Duncan!" yelled one of the outlaws as he leaped into the saddle and started in swift pursuit. "Kick that cuss off, or you'll—"

"Look out for your nag, Johnny!" cried Frank Spartan, thrusting his bared head out at the window, accompanied by a revolver. "He's going to stumble—sure!"

Stumble the horse did, but it was from the effects of a leaden pellet through the brain.

General as the surprise was, Joe Duncan was the one most wholly taken back. Through the entire scene he had been chuckling grimly as he watched the seeming terror which filled the face and eyes of the red-headed passenger. It was "nuts" to him, this sudden appearance of the road-agents whom the valiant Jonathan was to chew up at a single mouthful, and it was with an almost savage malice that he heeded the call for Jonathan after the other passengers had cleared their skirts of suspicion. Not that he even then suspected the truth. He only thought the braggart would receive a still greater scare, after which he would be a more silent if no wiser man.

Feebly, uncertainly, he made a move to comply with the order so savagely yelled after him, only to shrink back as Jonathan thrust a revolver against his stomach, grating hardly:

"Try it, durn ye! Try it on, an' go to keep them pizen imps comp'ny over the divide!"

Then came the clear call from Frank Spartan, and as a hasty glance showed the Howler the tumbling road-agent, a wild howl broke from his lips and he sprung up on the seat, sending the silk whistling through the air and awaking the echoes about the ears of the lead horses.

"Slam in the pills, you pard on the lower deck!" he yelled, with fervor. "Physic 'em tell they can't tell outside from inside! The old man'll keep the ship on a stiddy keel—git up, you lazy critters!"

Wild, snorting, half-crazed by the uproar, the shots, the unearthly howls, stung by the cutting lash, feeling their heads free, the lines lying along their quivering backs, the four horses leaped forward at top speed, the stage bouncing and leaping from side to side, threatening every instant to turn over or end for end. And wilder howled the mad reinsman. Sharper cracked his whip. Louder rose his peculiar slogan:

"I'm Howlin' Jonathan, a Terror from Headwaters!"

Captain Clean-up gave another savage string of oaths as he saw his man fall before the shot of Frank Spartan, and strove to mount his own steed, only to throw up his hands with a gasping, gurgling groan. Only to stagger back, turning half around, falling like a dead man before any one of his men could make a move to catch his body.

And thus it came that pursuit of the stage was not made by the road-agents. They lacked a head, and before they could recover sufficiently from the surprise, they realized how worse than vain would be any chase.

By that time the stage had covered the gentle slope, and must be speeding down the steep incline from whence the first glimpse of Good Leather could be obtained. Even if they could overtake it, the sound of firearms would bring

all the town to the rescue, perhaps to follow them to their death by lead, steel or rope.

Until the slope was passed, and all danger of pursuit seemed at an end, Frank Spartan and his fellow "insides" bore with the mad, reckless pace as a necessary evil, but when the divide was fairly crossed and the long, steep descent was begun, with a quickening rather than any diminution of pace, the sport thrust his head through the window and joltingly uttered the warning:

"Duncan, you idiot! Slack up! Do you want to— Ugh!"

A heavy jolt dashed his chin against the edge of the window, almost shivering his teeth, effectually cutting short all further speech.

"You drive! My team!" muttered Duncan, dazed, bewildered, but making an effort to recover the ribbons, only to have his knuckles rapped with the whip-stalk.

"Gee-up, my daisy birds!" yelled the Howler, using the silk with a dexterity that would have awakened the envy of a veteran overlander. "Show your mettle, my prittys! It's a man as is got hold of ye now—a man right from Humanville! Hough-ough-ugh-h-oof!"

Such an unearthly howl broke from his lips! Such a diabolical combination of all that was hideous and ear-splitting! Little wonder that the frightened horses ran as they had never ran before while the harness was on their backs, even on the most level of roads!

And this road—steep almost as the roof of a house, composed entirely of rock, still showing the powder marks, where a passageway had to be blasted before a vehicle could pass! With a slope to the left that might almost be called a precipice, reaching fully a hundred feet below the road-bed. With a rock wall on the right, and a bed so narrow in places that while one wheel almost grazed the rock, the hub of the other could almost be said to overhang the abyss!

Always the brake and often a rough-drag was used while descending this grade, even by the best and most skillful of drivers. But now, sitting erect, one hand grasping the four lines, the other flourishing the whip which sent forth a volley of pistol-like reports, his head bare, his fiery red hair floating in the breeze raised by their own swift passage, his voice tortured into the most diabolical of yelling howls, the Terror from Headwaters piloted the stage down the dizzy slope, seeming bound to hurl all, including himself, to destruction!

One minute of absolute terror, then Joe Duncan made a desperate attempt to regain control of the team before the end should overtake them. With a gasping curse, he strove to strike the mad jehu, only to have his hand knocked down—to be twisted from his seat and slammed down on the footboard, where he was held helpless, powerless by the full weight of the mad driver as he stood upon his back.

And wilder, more unearthly, more hideous came those howling explosions from the tempered throat of the red-headed maniac. Swifter than ever raced the horses, now wholly beyond control, forced to run at full speed to keep from being crushed by the heavy coach that came leaping and bounding after them, at times balanced on two wheels, at times with all four whizzing viciously in the air as the creaking, groaning vehicle made another of its wild plunges!

"Yar we come, head up an' tail over the dasher! Boun' to git thar on schedule time ef it don't leave us a wheel, brace or bolt! Howlin' John is got the ribbons, an' the Hebrew children says he's chief! He's the Terror from Headwaters, come down to show you sleepy critters a bit o' fun mixed up with business! Git thar, you mourners! Tell 'em the Howler's comin', an' yar's our visitin' keerd! Hough-ough-ugh-h-oof!"

Frank Spartan, as soon as he could steady his senses from that savage shock, jerked out a revolver and sent a shot through the front top of the coach, where he believed the mad driver was sitting. Luckily for Joe Duncan, this was just when the Howler twisted him from the box and slammed him on the foot-board, else he would have suffered instead of the real offender. The weapon was cocked for a second shot, but it was not fired. The stage gave a fearful bound, and Frank caught a glimpse of the rocks far below. Without a driver death was certain. Even an insane pilot was better than none!

"Good Leather, hold your breath!" yelled the Howler as he tightened his reins and shifted part of his weight from the back of Joe Duncan to the brake handle.

They were nearing the foot of the grade, but there was a sharp and ugly turn to make just before reaching the level. Mad though he seemed to be, Howling Jonathan knew that with their present momentum the stage would surely be hurled in a direct line over the barrier of rocks that lined the outer edge of the curve, and with a strength and skill hardly to be expected in one of his caliber, he steadied the plunging animals, with a gradual strain instead of a sudden jerk, and held the stage close to the inner wall, almost grazing it with the swiftly whirling hub. Pale, breathless, his jaws fixed, his muscles rigid, Frank Spartan waited for the

result, which he felt could be but one thing: death or crippled limbs at the best.

Then—the stage lifted up on the right side, spinning along on two wheels, trembling, creaking, groaning as though in affright at the utter destruction which seemed inevitable.

One moment thus, then—Frank Spartan sunk back with a gasping breath, his eyes closing, his heart beating once more. Steel-nerved as he was called, he would never forget those few brief seconds.

Wilder, with a triumphant ring through its recklessness, rose the hideous howling from the box seat as the stage ran easily along the level, which led up to the town of Good Leather. Shrill, piercing, then falling to a lugubrious base, that howl aroused all Good Leather, bringing forth old and young alike to solve the mystery; for little human was there in the hideous sounds.

And drawing himself erect in his seat, squaring his arms after the true professional style, Howling Jonathan urged his foam-covered team along the level, into town, through the broad street, his keen eyes singling out the main building in sight, the front of which bore the quaint sign "MY HOUSE."

With his team now well in hand, he drew up before the hotel with a flourish, grinning broadly at the many curious faces turned toward him. He was in his element, now. The center of observation, the "biggest toad in the puddle!"

"Hough-ough-ugh-h-oof!" came from his swelling lungs with a suddenness and power that caused more than one to clap hands to ears to deaden the hideous screech. "I'm Howling Jonathan Hebrew, the Terror from Headwaters! Three in one! Shadrach, Meshach and To-bed-we-go, the Hebrew children right out o' the glowin' furnace o' red hot fire—their we-us-an'-comp'ny! Jest dropped in to see you fer a bit. To wake ye up from your slumbers. To rub the cobwebs out o' your eyes. To show ye how a live man looks when he's chuck-full o' fun. To chaw up your old chiefs, an' sot up a new god fer ye to kneel down an' worship. Howlin' Jonathan's his name, an' he's the Terror from Headwaters!"

CHAPTER III.

THE WANDERING MINSTREL.

"Is that all?"

"A donkey go-cart, a ole man, an' a petti-cut—ugh!"

In different tones, but each betraying strong contempt mingled with disgust and disappointment, came these muttered ejaculations from a dense fringe of bushes which overlooked the little noonday camp on the level beside the tiny spring that bubbled up from beneath the moss-covered rock, to form a shallow pool and then creep away silently until hidden among the grass-sprinkled stones and boulders.

They were rough, shaggy-bearded fellows, carrying weapons at their waists, and looking as though they were both able and willing to make use of the tools, and that without too close a scrutiny into the merits of a cause. And after the one eager glance down at the camp, their gaze turned toward the man who had interrupted their social game of cards to lead them all this way to inspect a treasure.

A peculiar smile curled his thin lips, and one long forefinger tapped them lightly. A moment later he muttered in guarded tones:

"Listen! What is it you hear, stupid rascals?"

With puzzled looks the two men bent their heads; then one of them growled, in a surly undertone:

"Ef that ole cuss would only hold his hush a minnit!"

"It's a cat—ketched by the tail in a steel-trap—an' a powerful sick ole cat, too, I reckon!" grinned the other fellow.

"That's what I brought you here to see and hear," added the tall member of the party, showing his teeth in a half-mocking smile.

His fellows scowled back at him angrily, but only for a moment, nor did they dare utter a word of what they really felt while those inky-black eyes were fixed upon them, with that smile before their eyes. If Ugly Dan Bennison intended this for a joke, a joke it must be.

That prefix seemed hardly appropriate as Daniel Bennison stood smiling, his white, even teeth just showing their tips behind his jetty mustache, the ripe red of his lips forming a pleasant contrast. Indeed, few who saw him for the first time would have hesitated for a second look before pronouncing him a remarkably handsome man.

Tall, athletic, perfectly proportioned in limb and body, his face was a fitting match, his features being clear-cut and regular, his complexion, though tinged with tan, being remarkably pure and clear for a man who had led the life common report assigned to Ugly Dan—the life of a fire-eater, gambler and hard drinker.

Of all the "bad men" who had ever paid Good Leather the compliment of a prolonged visit, Dan Bennison, with possibly a single exception, was generally set down as the best man to let alone when in his cups. A past master in the arts of handling either pistol or knife, he seemed constantly on the lookout for a chance to

bring one or the other into active use. The slightest excuse was sufficient, and if that shadowy pretense was lacking when he felt particularly "rampageous," Bennison could carve or perforate the unlucky object of his wrath or malice with just as great gusto.

Time and again he had proven his utter recklessness and contempt of personal danger, but fully as often he had been known to strike his enemies from behind and without the slightest warning. He might meet a man with a cordial smile, with one hand clasping his in a hearty grip, with words of warmest friendship on his lips, only to drive the steel to his heart or send a bullet through his brain the next moment.

It was this utter recklessness, this diabolism, that gave him the name of Ugly Dan and rendered him such a dreaded character in Good Leather and its neighboring camps.

Ugly Dan showed his white teeth as he saw those black looks turn to fawning smiles. He knew his power, and no man could enjoy it more. But just now he had a still more important object in view.

"Bah! ye blind-eyed moles!" he laughed, softly, his glittering orbs fixed on the scene below. "That is music fit for the heavenly choir—and yonder is one of the angels!"

A touch of exaggeration, but not wholly without foundation in truth.

Near the little spring stood a two-wheeled cart, covered with a dingy, weather-worn canvas tilt. To one side, greedily plucking up the grass that grew quite rankly along the edges of the tiny stream, was a long-eared, long-haired donkey, evidently the motive power which had brought the cart to this spot.

Leaning against one wheel of the cart, was an aged man, his bare head covered with milk-white hair, long and silken, curling slightly as it fell over his shoulders and blended with the patriarchal beard that rippled over his bosom and even touched his lap as he sat playing on a dingy, worn violin. His lids were closed, his head bowed, his thin fingers moving slowly, and there were tears moistening his sunken cheeks as he drew long, wailing sounds from his instrument.

No regular tune. More as though the old man was trying to express his inner feelings. And yet, as Ugly Dan muttered, it was music almost fit for the spheres.

A little to one side, bending over a small fire made from dead limbs which had fallen from the old, light-ing-scarred tree over her head, was a trim, graceful figure, charming despite the plain, coarse garb and humble occupation.

A girl, a young woman, rather, who was evidently a daughter or granddaughter to the minstrel. Despite the difference in age, there was a strong resemblance between them, though one was bent and bowed by care and sorrow and years, while the other was lithe and erect, showing health and strength and vitality in every move and action.

In the shade of the tree, and warmed by her work, she had cast off the broad-brimmed hat of straw as superfluous, leaving her head uncovered, her rosy face fully exposed to view, though she little suspected the proximity of spies.

Her hair, thick and luxuriant, done up in twin braids that reached below her waist, after the quaint fashion more often seen in past years than at present, was too light to be called golden, too bright and soft and silken for even an enemy to brand it as tow. Her cheeks, plump and smooth, were rosy, their natural color being a little heightened by the heat cast out by the crackling sticks over which she bent, cooking dinner for herself and her father. Her large eyes were bright and eloquent, blue as the sky overhead. Her lips, temptingly arched, were red and moist, parted just sufficient to afford a glimpse of the small, even teeth, white as milk. Her neck was encircled by a white kerchief, crossed over the bosom and the ends tucked beneath her girdle; but this did not disguise the neatly rounded contour of her shoulders and bosom.

Her arms were bare to the elbow, white and rounded, her hands small and shapely, though tanned by exposure to the hot sun. Her dress, of stout woolen, was short enough to display a pair of neatly turned ankles, ending in small feet hidden in stout shoes.

"It's them you mean, then?" suddenly uttered one of the men, with a look of surprise toward Ugly Dan. "Crazy Dutch an' his gal?"

"What else?" sharply retorted the fire-eater. "What do you know of them, anyway?"

The lesser ruffian shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Nothin' much, boss; only that they go traipsin' round the kentry huntin' fer somethin' they can't seem to never find. They must make a pretty good thing of it, too. I've seed 'em play an' sing in a crowd, when nigh a batful of dust an' ducats would pay 'em fer the show."

"They'd ought to be pay enough fer cleanin' up, down thar, then!" muttered the other fellow, a covetous light coming into his dull eyes.

Ugly Dan laughed softly, but his bright eyes were fixed on the trim figure bending over the fire.

"It will pay, if you want to make the raffle.

Those wandering minstrels are usually well fixed, no matter how miserably they dress and how eloquently they plead for aid to keep them from starving."

"We'll bounce them ef you say so, boss!" greedily added the ruffian.

His mate was less impulsive, rising higher and peering keenly around as though searching for something more. Ugly Dan noticed this, and muttered sharply:

"What is it, Blister?"

"Waal, I didn't know," hesitated the fellow, rubbing his bristling chin. "When you see them critters, you gin'ally see 'nother not fur off. They do say Frank Spartan is dead gone on the little gal."

A vicious light leaped into the eyes of Ugly Dan.

"Is that it? High-toned Frank, eh?"

Blister nodded assent.

"That settles it, then. You two can have the lucre, and I'll take the girl for my share of the plunder. High-toned Frank? I wish he was there now—I'd buss the beauty before his very eyes!"

"Rather you then me, boss!" grinned Blister.

Ugly Dan flung out one hand with a careless gesture, but there was something in his voice as he spoke that belied his words. He hated the dashing sport, but he could not scorn him as much as he wished.

"He's nobody's grandfather, and I've got it in for the cuss if we ever meet. I'll make him yelp like a cur—mind that!"

"That settles him, then," nodded Blister, though there was a peculiar light in his averted eyes that might have brought down on his head a speedy punishment had it been seen by Ugly Dan. "Now fer them critters down yender, boss. Is it a real clean-up, or jest fer fun?"

"Use your own pleasure about that," was the prompt reply. "I'm satisfied to have some fun with the girl, and care nothing for their boards, supposing they have any. Take or leave, as you choose."

He said no more, but broke cover and strode down the slope leading to the little encampment, lifting his hat and smiling brightly as the girl, startled by the sound of a loosened stone, glanced up from the simple meal she was just taking from the fire.

"Why, Miss Brown! what a delightful surprise me, please," and Ugly Dan checked himself with an air of vexed confusion, like one just discovering his mistake. "Really, I thought I had chanced upon old and tried friends!"

At the sound of his voice, the old man ceased playing, and rose to his feet. Though his face was turned toward the speaker, though his full blue eyes were wide open, there was something in both that told he could see nothing, that he was blind.

"What is it, child? Who comes? He knows you, Amelia?"

"No, father, a stranger," was the low, quick response as the girl moved back until the outstretched hand touched her shoulder.

There was a faint accent perceptible in both tones that spoke of a land beyond the seas, though a long residence in America had nearly obliterated this.

"A stranger, but a friend, my dear sir," added Ugly Dan in his softest tones, his handsome face lit up by a bright, frank-seeming smile that was meant for the daughter alone. "I caught a glimpse of your charming daughter. I did not wait to make sure, but—if I am intruding, I will go."

"It is free country here, my friend: free for you as free for us," replied the wandering minstrel with a grave dignity that well became his snowy locks and patriarchal appearance. "Be welcome, sir, to what we can give. Amelia, child, the meal is ready to eat—not?"

"Thanks, but we have already eaten," quickly uttered Ugly Dan, as he caught a shade of doubt flitting over the rosy face. "So heartily, too; I am sorry. It is not often one in these wilds has an opportunity to taste meat dressed by such fair hands."

He bowed to Amelia, hoping he had made a point, but her downcast eyes refused to appropriate the compliment, and the old man's voice was a little harder and more cold as he spoke in reply:

"It is compliments you speak, sir. That is not good for poor girls. You will excuse if I say, keep them by yourself? It is not angry that I am, at all, only that is the law I makes when we grow poor and leave our old home far behind, looking for—for our poor boy!"

Ugly Dan was more taken aback than he would have been by angriest speech, and a puzzled look came into his dark eyes as he saw the old man falter, saw the girl draw his thin hand caressingly to her bosom, then gently wipe away the sudden tears that came into his sightless eyes. He made no reply, for he knew not what to say. If it hadn't been for an uneasy, impatient movement on the part of his companions, he might even have given over the unholy thoughts which had brought him to this little camp.

He turned toward Blister, with a dark frown, making an imperious gesture, both of which were hidden from the girl.

"'Melie, you can ask the gentleman!" muttered the old man, in tones that trembled strangely. "He may know. It is a chance, and we mustn't miss a single one, child—not even the faintest!"

"Soon, father; when we have eaten. It was an early breakfast, you know, and you are faint. I know," and she playfully tapped his lips with one little hand, laughing for him, though there were tears in her eyes which he could not see. "You are so contrary, that I must be a spoiled child to keep you at all good. And I say eat, now!"

The old man yielded to her pretty imperiousness, and she seated him carefully in the shade of the tree, giving him food and hovering about him as a young mother might look after her first child, eating nothing at all until his hunger was satisfied, though she protested she was proving herself a very glutton.

Ugly Dan watched all this from a little distance, through the smoke of his cigar. His handsome face was grave and hard set, but there was a glitter in his black eyes that kept his men well in subjection.

"The devil in him is wakin' up, sure!" muttered Blister to his mate in guarded tones. "Them fools'll hev a benefit afore long, now you want to listen to my sermon, pard!"

"Long's he sticks to the dry-goods, I won't grum'le," was the satisfied response.

But almost as often as they rested on the pretty, rosy face, did the eyes of Ugly Dan wander to the lined, care-worn face of the father. And as often did a puzzled light come into them, making them glow and glitter, drawing deep lines of thought between his jetty brows. Where had he seen a face like that? What was it that so powerfully attracted him, yet filled his heart with a vicious hatred?

Try as he might, he could not solve the riddle. The old man finished eating, and as Amelia took his plate, his hand drew her down until he could whisper in her ear. She hesitated for a moment, glancing swiftly from face to face of the three strangers, then bent low and breathed a few quick words. With a sigh, the old man took up his violin and gently touched its strings as his sightless eyes turned toward Ugly Dan and his men.

"My friends, you will bear with an old man? This is my way to give back thanks for what we have. It is my prayer, for that is all the religion I know. If moosic is not your liking, that makes me sorry."

"Don't make us feel that we are intruding, my dear sir," smoothly uttered Ugly Dan. "We are passionately fond of music, but if our presence is a restraint on you, we will go away."

"No, no, not yet—you go away not yet!" eagerly cried the old man, his face strongly agitated.

"Not unless you wish it, my dear sir." "I do not so wish—I wish you to stop. There is something I have to ask you, before you may go away. Something I hope you can tell, to make our hearts leap—'Melie!'"

His voice broke and choked, and the name of his child was uttered with an effort. She hurried to his side, her little hands caressing him and her face bowed until it rested against his snowy hair.

"You will excuse him, gentlemen," she uttered hurriedly. "He has suffered so much sorrow—so much pain and trouble! He will be better in a little. Not, father?"

"Better—when we find our boy, 'Melie!'" muttered the old man, his tones low, his voice like that of a wearied child. "It is so long to wait—so far—so weary work, this waiting, this longing, this not finding—*ach!* that is the worst of all!"

"If we can do anything to—" Ugly Dan paused short as Amelia waived her hand.

"It may be—but not now. He is too much excited, you see. Father, you play a little now. That calm you, that clear your poor brain. See! the stranger wait to listen, father."

"*Ach!* the time was!" muttered the old minstrel, lifting his head with a pitiful pride, as a faint flush crept into his thin face. "The time was when many thousand waited just for this, like you, my good friends!"

He drew the violin to his breast with a loving gesture, then touched bow to strings, invoking a sound, low and wailing, yet inexpressibly sweet and sad.

"That—you hear, my friends? It was the net that held them fast, while I filled their souls with moosic! Just a little quiver—just one string made to speak! But it was enough. The big crowd was mine own captive then. I made them laugh, I made them cry, I filled their souls with joy everlasting! I—yes, 'Melie. Oxcnose me, my friends. I am old and growing silly, you see. I will play, not talk—*ach!*"

And play he did, such music as one seldom hears in this every-day world of ours. Words cannot begin to describe the marvelous sounds he drew from that smoky-looking box of wood, but something may be guessed from the fact that even Blister and Tom Wacker sat open-mouthed, speechless, spell-bound, captives to his wondrous art. And Ugly Dan had to lower his long-lashed lids to keep down the moisture that

came into his eyes with a persistency that rapid winking failed to keep them clear.

And when the music died away in a low, weird wail, the three ruffians drew in their breath gaspingly, their eyes avoiding each other, as though ashamed to betray the only pure emotion they had known for many a long year.

"You sling a mighty lively elbow, boss!" at length uttered Blister, feeling impelled to say something, but at a sad loss for fitting words.

"Be durned ef it wouldn't make a sick kitten dance!" supplemented Tom Wacker. "Lays 'way over a hand-organ, it does, now!"

"So?" and the minstrel laughed softly, amused by the novel compliments, for such he knew were intended.

Ugly Dan alone was silent, though he saw Amelia glancing shyly in his direction. That old query was perplexing him: when and where had he met a face like this? Like, yet unlike. He could hardly explain what he meant, even in his own mind.

"It is my way to pray," softly muttered the old man, his face upturned, his sightless eyes seemingly fixed on the bright blue sky above. "It is my one poor hope of finding him—my boy! He was so fond of moosic! He would stand and listen while I played, long ago—so long ago it seems to me! *Ach!* if it could only be a dream—to wake from it, me! But no—it is too sure a fact! 'Melie!'"

"Yes, father," and the girl glided to his side, one hand gently touching the upturned face.

"'Melie—it is time, not? I haf played. It is enough, eh?"

"Yes, father, I will ask the gentlemen about our poor lost boy. But you must remember that this is, oh! such a big country! So wide! So big a ways between two little places! So great, you might hide all the world in one little hollow, and never know it was there! And one poor boy—so small with this big world, though our all—it is so easy that many men can say nothing of him when we ask. You will remember, my father?"

"Yes, 'Melie," with a faint sigh. "I know—I will remember. But some day we will find our Franz. God is good. He will not always turn his face away—not always, I think, 'Melie!'"

She had to turn her face away from that pitiful look, blind though those eyes were, that seemed to beg a favorable answer. Her own eyes were almost blinded, or she might have noticed how pale Ugly Dan grew as he heard that name; might have seen how suddenly he averted his face, while one strong hand mechanically sought and gripped a pistol-butt.

"Some day, yes, father, we will learn all," she brokenly uttered, then clearing her voice with an evident effort, she added:

"It is this my poor father wishes, gentlemen. His son he is looking for. He hopes that maybe you have met him. This is his picture, when he was a few years younger than now. And his name, it is Franz Moskau."

She held out a card photograph toward Blister, who chanced to be the one nearest her, and as he took it from her hand, she stepped back once more to the side of her father, whose sightless eyes seemed to be reading every change on the face of the ruffian.

"A right smart-lookin' chap, miss, but I can't call his face to mind jest now. Wish't I could, fer your sake, but it won't do no good to lie about it."

"Nur this 'coon, nuther," chimed in Tom Wacker, shaking his shaggy pate with grave emphasis. "Nuther the face nur the name hits me wuth a cent. Mebbe the boss kin make a better riddle?"

Slowly Ugly Dan extended his hand for the photograph, his face hard-set, his eyes glittering evilly. He knew now what had been haunting him, without a glance at the pictured face, but still he took it and gazed at it long and closely.

A bright, boyish face, yet with much of sturdy manhood in it, too. A face that bore a certain resemblance to that of the old man who was so eagerly listening for a word from those thin, tightly-compressed lips.

"He is gone so long, dear man," came tremblingly from his lips. "I haf miss him so much! I cannot hear why he is not come back home long time ago! It is all black—all nothing—all pain and grief and weary hunting! *Ach!* mein Got! if you can only say that is him—that is one I know—that is a man yet alive! It would be so easy for you to say, so much for me, for 'Melie, his sister, to hear! It would make me crazy-glad, I think—if the joy did not kill me quite!"

"I am not sure—I am foggy in the wits," slowly muttered Ugly Dan, his glittering orbs still fixed on the picture. "It is a face—I think I have seen it, sometime—but where?"

"'Melie! it is coming! the time we look so long time after! Franz is living! He will come home to us—mein Got! my poor heart!"

"Mercy—tell him, if you know!" almost fiercely muttered the girl, supporting the old man in her arms as he seemed almost fainting.

Those black eyes flashed into her pale face, and with such a strange light in their depths as caused her to shrink back, trembling.

"My wits are clouded, somehow, and then

music only can clear them. If your father would only play a little for—"

"Play? It is so, 'Melie! I knew Franz come back to us through the dear moosic! He was so fond, always! Yes, yes, I will play—play 'til my arms drop off! It is for him—for my boy!"

So agitated that he could hardly hold violin or bow, the poor old man awoke the echoes, tears rolling down his cheeks until his snowy beard was wet with them. And with a devilish light in his eyes, Ugly Dan watched him, watched the girl, showing his white teeth in a vicious smile that fairly frightened his two hardened tools.

He caught the frightened look which filled Amelia's eyes, and lowered his own, smoothing his countenance with an effort. He was not yet ready to cast aside his mask entirely.

"So! the music is driving away the mists! Faster, old man! It is coming, I am almost sure! Let me look at the picture once more—ha! I know—bah! it has fled again!" he muttered, casting the photograph violently to the ground.

Amelia sprang forward and caught it up, retreating hastily as Ugly Dan extended one hand as though to grasp her by the arm. He laughed softly, then added:

"Still faster, old man! Play something quick and devilish! I am on a hot trail! I can almost catch what you want! Ha! I have it now! I can almost swear—Why do you stop playing?" he snarled, fiercely.

"'Melie! he knows—the good, kind gentleman knows! He will tell us where we can find our fine boy! 'Melie, help me give thanks to the good Got for this blessing! *Ach!* my poor tongue is so thick! Help me, 'Melie—pray that it is so to be for us all!"

The poor man fell to his knees, his clasped hands elevated, but his voice was choked with sobs and gasps of overwhelming joy.

And Ugly Dan stood with folded arms watching him, his eyes aglow, his thin lips curling with a satanic glee!

CHAPTER IV.

UGLY DAN CLAIMS HIS PRICE.

FOR a brief space he forgot himself, suffering his real disposition to show forth in that glittering of his eyes, in that devilish smile, in the wolfish baring of his teeth. Until that hour, he had never met these people, but for all that he hated the white-haired old man with an intensity such as can find birth in only a nature utterly depraved, wholly without mercy or a single generous sentiment.

Had there been even the faintest spark of either in his composition, he must have been touched by the spectacle thus presented, must have been driven from the utterly devilish course which he had mapped out since hearing the name of Franz Moskau.

Rough, brutal, evil and crime-stained though they were, both Tom Whacker and Blister were in a measure affected, and drew aside with a degree of sheepiness such as they did not often feel. Somehow those tears of mingled joy and gratitude, with that husky, broken voice, stirred up long buried sensibilities, and for the time being they forgot their schemes of plunder.

"It is so, 'Melie! He knows, this good, kind gentleman sent by pitying heaven to tell us of our Franz! He knows—he will tell us how to find our boy! 'Melie—think! The moosic it was that brings him to us back again! The moosic—and this noble sir—*ach!*" and the poor man, his face streaming wet with tears, kneeling with clasped hands, his voice breaking afresh, turned once more toward the heartless villain. "It is so little the weak old tongue can say, while the poor heart swells up so big and jumps so hard in the throat! So poor and weak it sounds, but we thank you, 'Melie and I! It is so long we have been looking! And now—it is foolish, not! that I cry so silly?"

He tried to laugh, but it was a ghastly mirth, and his child touched those poor, quivering lips with one hand, herself pale and shrinking from before that baneful gaze.

"Was it that I talk too much, 'Melie? It is hard to know the right way when the poor heart is full over so many times! Franz—Franz—that is the name it sings and cries and laughs all the time! And this kind, noble stranger—I must thank him one time more, that he brings the good news to a poor old father! If I could see his fine face! If I could only—'Melie, child, why speaks he nothing? Surely my old, silly tongue has not mad macken?"

Amelia glanced toward Ugly Dan, and the vague, uneasy doubts and fears which that cruel smile had awakened in her bosom, were deepened and strengthened by what she saw. There was little of kindness or of sympathy in those glowing black orbs. Yet she dared not speak her fears. The old man was so terribly agitated with his new-found hopes, that she feared death would follow a too abrupt awakening.

"He is waiting for you to calmer get, father," she muttered, smoothing the milk-white hair as though it covered the head of a babe. "He thinks it is not good, so much excitement

for you. And then—he said it was cloudy in his memory—it is just possible, father, that he may think what is not so—that it may not be our boy."

She was trying to break the blow which instinct told her was impending, but it was in vain. Her words only frightened the poor old man, without in the least weakening his faith. And as Ugly Dan saw this, his thin lips curled back from his white teeth more than ever like a wolf.

"And you, fair lady?" he softly breathed, his voice all deference, while his eyes were bold and lawless. "You have no word of thanks for the news I can give? Not one word?"

"Yes, yes—words plenty!" eagerly ejaculated the old man, as he reached one hand and grasped Amelia by the arm. "She says not much because her heart is over-full; but she will thank you—*ach!* so many times over will her thanks come! Is it not, 'Melie'?"

It was doubly hard for the poor girl. Fearing, she scarcely knew what, with suspicions which she could not define, with doubts born of a look, to give thanks for what she felt in her heart was to prove a curse instead of the blessing the blind man believed. Yet she must, or make the helpless father suffer what she was suffering now.

She hardly knew what words passed her lips. She dared not look up lest she again encounter that glittering, evil gaze. She spoke until her voice choked, then stood in breathless waiting, trembling, sick at heart, fearing—what?

"And now—it is not too soon to ask for the blind sir to speak the glad news?" tremblingly ventured the blind man.

"Thanks are cheap, and cost nothing more than a little breath, of which we all have so much," slowly uttered Ugly Dan—ugly indeed, with that hard, merciless, mocking look in his black eyes!

A pained look came into the face of the blind man as he listened, and his clasped hands lowered. It was not a speech such as he expected from the lips of one whom, until then, he had regarded as but little lower than an angel of light. It smacked of the earth earthy, and none the less significant from being so vague.

"It is poor wanderers that you see, my friend, but what we have is yours. It is Franz that is so dear to us, and money is nothing worth. Take it all—take everything, just so you say the place where we can find our poor lost boy! 'Melie?' and he turned his sightless eyes toward the girl; "is it not good that I speak like this?"

There came no immediate answer, though her lips parted and her throat worked convulsively. She knew now that her suspicions were not without foundation, even while she strove to banish them.

Ugly Dan was watching her, as a hungry hawk watches a bird of which it feels sure in good time.

"Yes, Amelia, what have you to say? Will you make no sacrifice? Will you pay nothing for the glad news of the lost boy?"

"Yes, yes!" eagerly cried the blind man, rising to his feet and with trembling hands emptying his pockets of both gold and silver coin. "Melie will pay too! It is for her brother—for our dear Franz! 'Melie is good child. *Ach!* Yes, so good! But it is Franz that was born first, and he has been gone so many long years!"

With all her fears, with all her doubts, Amelia was a true child of Vaterland, and with quick fingers she caught up the coin which fell from the trembling grasp of the blind man, casting a defiant glance toward the two lesser ruffians as they instinctively started forward to reap their anticipated harvest.

Ugly Dan laughed shortly, and this feminine trait gave him still greater assurance, if that could be. He fancied that there was a love of money for money's sake, in that action.

"He was a mighty good boy, and that's the fact, father," he said, with an affectation of blunt heartiness cunning enough to deceive one with clearer and calmer wits than those of the blind man. "It is worth a neat sum to find him again, and when you do, you will never feel the need of money again. He will be rich—he will smother you in gold, if you wish it!"

"Gold—poof!" and the old man flung out one thin hand with a gesture of contempt. "It is not money—it is Franz I want most!"

"Just my case, but I'll take the ducats, every time," laughed the ruffian. "I wouldn't think of such a thing, but I am terribly poor. I have hardly a rag to my back, and not a red cent in my clothes. I expect we would have starved to death, only for this lucky meeting."

Tom Wacker and Blister covered their bearded lips the better to smother the chuckles which rose in their throats at this unblushing lie. What a facetious fellow Ugly Dan was, to be sure!

"It is a pity that so good a man should come to poverty like that," uttered the blind man, with genuine pity in face and voice. "I wish it was more that we can give, for your sake, my friend, but it is not gold we hunt for, my child and me. We take only such like we may need, to carry us along to hunt still new places over for our poor boy. We take no more until that

is gone. Then we haf to crush our poor pride down and make believe we give plenty back in pay, though it is only moosie and thanks—thanks from the sore hearts that grow so faint and weary, so homesick, so—*ach!* the goot Got knows!"

"And the sweet little Amelia?" added Ugly Dan, his voice soft and almost purring as he turned again toward the maiden. "She is willing to pay, also! She is slow to say as much, though!"

"She is young, goot friend," hastily interposed the old man, eager to please this exacting stranger. "She is modest and words do not come so quick, so easy to girls, then. 'Melie?' like me, you say this is nothing worth, just so we find our poor boy?"

"I would give all—life, even!" impulsively cried the girl.

"Now that is hearty," quickly uttered Ugly Dan. "You give us all your money. You will add the donkey and cart, too?"

"That, too, if you like," said the old man. "What use for it now? To walk is good health. To sleep—bah! our hearts are warm enough for cover! Is it not so, 'Melie'?"

"Whatever you say, father," was the low response. "But the stranger has not told us where Franz is, yet."

"That is no hurry, my child," quickly uttered the blind man, with a nervous, deprecatory look in his face as it turned toward the rascal who was hugely enjoying his devilish little farce.

"She is so young, and the young think it hard to wait. They haf not patience like old people—no. Now me—I am patient. I can wait. It is so long time that Franz went away, a little more is not matter much. *Ach*, yes, I can wait. I am cool and composed—see!" and he stretched out his trembling hands in pitiful confirmation.

"It is a bargain, then?" persisted Ugly Dan.

"You give up everything, and Amelia—"

"Melie pay too—'Melie is goot child!'"

"You will pay, and she will pay," laughed Ugly Dan, with an evil light in his jetty orbs.

"That is enough, and I am satisfied."

"And Franz, goot sir! It is time now to ask that—not?"

"The young fellow—let me see!" and the villain seemed to be reflecting, his brows wrinkling, but with his eyes gloating over the fair face and perfect figure of Amelia Moskau.

"You said you knew him!" she cried, an indignant flash filling her full blue eyes, twin spots of color leaping into her smooth cheeks.

"Melie, patience—it is only a little longer, and we haf so long waited already," nervously muttered the blind man, fearful lest the stranger be angered by any undue impatience.

So much depended upon his speech! Poor Herman Moskau! It was a truly devilish jest, and heavy will fall the blow when it comes.

"The card looked familiar, but it is so easy to be mistaken in a face," was the calm retort. "I think it is the man you are looking for. He was tall—"

"Like a soldier—so?" and the blind man drew his still athletic figure proudly erect, making the military salute. "So! it was a figure to make fill with joy the eyes of a recruiting officer. That was like my boy. So, 'Melie? Is it not that?"

"Like you, father, only younger."

"Yes, younger, and more handsome in the face. That was long time ago, before my eyes grew tired of looking on sorrow and trouble, before I turned blind. So long—yet I can see his face yet! He was my only son, you see, my good friend, and that makes a difference, maybe," he added, with a pitiful smile, disarming criticism.

"Tall is right," nodded Ugly Dan. "The man I knew was light complexioned, with blue eyes and yellow hair. Hair much the color of this on the head of his charming sister," and he tried to touch the shining head, only to be baffled by a swift motion.

"It is so, 'Melie,'" laughed Herman Moskau, a bright smile lighting up his lined features. "Like yours—only a little brighter and more soft, not?"

In every word he betrayed the passionate love which he felt for the missing son in quest of whom he had wandered so many weary miles. And, true-hearted girl! Amelia heartily agreed with him in everything that brought herself into comparison with the lost one.

"I won't say that, for it would be perjury the most rank," laughed Ugly Dan, taking a malicious delight in protracting the scene, though his more matter-of-fact fellows were shifting uneasily, showing their growing impatience as openly as they dared. "For a man, he was good-looking enough, but Amelia is more than charming—she is without an equal in all the rosebud garden of girls!"

"A goot girl, yes—but Franz, he was mine own boy!"

"And you are naturally in a hurry to learn all about him. That's all right. I don't blame you, for a fine fellow he is—or was when I last met him."

"And that was not long? not far away, dear friend?" eagerly uttered the old man, his poor, trembling fingers tightly clasped together to still their quivering, his face full of loving impatience.

"Only a little bit, compared with a lifetime. Not many steps, compared with a trip to the moon."

"Melie—my head is so buzz-buzz! I can't make the words out straight come," muttered Herman Moskau, with a pained look, as his hand reached out in quest of his loving guide.

"My poor father!" brokenly muttered the girl, flashing an indignant glance toward the smiling rascal. "He is laughing at us! He is a bad man—"

"Melie, hush! It is some fun of the child's, kind gentleman," he hurriedly added, turning his wan face toward Ugly Dan, forcing a smile that was more pitiful than tears could have been.

"She is so excited, so crazy-mad with joy at hearing of her brother, you see. It is not for you to mind—this little foolishness, my friend."

"Don't worry on my account, I beg of you," laughed the rascal. "I rather like it, for it shows she has spirit—the more credit to him who brings her into the traces!"

"Then you do know? It was not a lifetime—*ach!* I knew the goot Got would not be so cruel!"

There was a brief silence, during which Ugly Dan took a quick look around, nodding shortly as his eyes rested for a moment on the impatient faces of his two comrades in evil.

"Yes, I knew Franz Moskau. I knew him well—better, perhaps, than any living person, with the exception of yourself and charming daughter."

"You hear, 'Melie? It was a goot friend he has been, this nice man! He knew our Franz—loved him, like a brother! *Ach! mein Got!*"

"You may well say that, old fellow," with a short, hard laugh. "I know he never had a friend who ever stuck to him closer than I did, if I do say it myself. And if his span could have been lengthened to a round thousand years, I know he would never have forgotten me. He will tell you as much himself, when you find him, I'll warrant."

"Find him—is it so, 'Melie?' faintly muttered the blind man, his limbs trembling so violently as to almost sink beneath him.

"If you know—if you are not playing a cruel joke on two poor helpless creatures, you will tell us where to find Franz," uttered the maiden, slowly, firmly, forcing herself to meet that evil gaze.

Ugly Dan made a covert gesture, which Tom Wacker promptly interpreted, saying:

"Ef it's wuth payin' fer, it wouldn't do no harm to set eyes on the fu'st stallment, would it, now?"

"Take it all! 'Melie, child, give them the money!" hurriedly cried the blind man, feeling in his pocket, forgetting that he had already stripped himself of all gold. "It is not the poor money that shall keep away the big joy—it is Franz we want most! Pay them, child!"

"For myself, I would not ask a dollar, even though I was starving, but my friends—well, you will be the gainer after all. Franz was rich—he must be richer now. He will make it all up to you, sure!" said Ugly Dan, with a light laugh.

"It is the boy, not the gold. Poor, without a cent—without a rag to cover him—I care not; only so he comes home to our sick and weary hearts!" brokenly muttered the blind minstrel. Knowing how vain would be her efforts to defend their little store in case she should make the effort, Amelia flung the coin on the ground, and the two lesser ruffians scrambled for it like boys after a choice nut. And Ugly Dan laughed softly, not one of them touched by the pathos which filled the face and voice of the blind father.

"That is all—every dollar," she said, hardly, pointing toward the grazing donkey as she added: "Yonder is Neddy. Here is the cart, with all our poor things. Take them all, and now, if you are a man, tell us what we have paid you for?"

For once Herman Moskau forgot to reprove her impatience. He was standing with his hands partly raised and tightly clasped, his wan, lined face lit up with a pitiful blending of hope and fear, waiting for the glad tidings of his long lost boy.

"That is his payment," slowly uttered Ugly Dan, showing his teeth in a peculiar smile that sent a cold chill thrilling over the maiden as she looked and listened. "You have paid me nothing, as yet."

"She will—she will pay you all she can!" hurriedly cried the blind man. "Melie, you have kept nothing back?"

"Nothing, father," sadly replied the poor girl, fresh tears coming into her eyes at this cruel suspicion.

"It is so if she says it, sir," and there was a trace of his old dignity in both his face and tones. "Melie is a good girl. She would not cheat or lie, not even to bring back our boy! *Ach!* no!"

"I have a wretchedly poor memory, you see. I fear I will not be able to remember just when and where I last saw Franz Moskau. Unless—one kiss from your ripe lips, child, would answer, I am quite sure!"

With an indignant cry Amelia shrunk back from the smiling villain as he stepped toward

her as though about to claim the reward thus demanded, for demand it was after all.

Herman Moskau, with a power and energy which was hardly to be looked for in one so aged and shaken, pushed Ugly Dan back, his face flushing, his breath coming fast and strong. "It is not that way our maidens are to be treated, sir!"

"Just as you say," with a short, careless laugh. "You know my terms. The gold is for my mates, the kiss for me. Refuse, and you can go your way to find the lost son and brother as best you may. Not another word falls from my lips until I am fully paid for my trouble."

"Melie—it is for Franz!" brokenly muttered the poor old man. "It is not so much, after all—one kiss! It may never come another chance—the world is so big, the places so many *ach, mein Got!*"

He bowed his head with a groan that came from the uttermost depths of his bleeding heart. He looked the very picture of hopeless misery, and though the hot tears of shame and indignation filled the big blue eyes, Amelia came forward and took his hand in both of hers, her voice faint and strained:

"It shall be so, my poor father! It is not your Melie that shall be blamed for losing even this poor chance! If you hold my hand—so!"

She stepped toward Ugly Dan, motioning him back as he stepped forward with a mocking laugh.

"It is hard price you demand, sir, but I will pay it, for *his* sake. I would pay it double over, to know that you are true in what you promise."

"Shall I take my oath?" smiled Ugly Dan.

"It would break as easy as your simple promise, if you are cruel enough to fool this poor, helpless blind man," was the cold response as she offered her pale cheek for the kiss.

But Ugly Dan was not content with that. He deftly turned her face with his hands, and while his evil eyes flamed into hers, he pressed her pure lips with his foul ones, laughing maliciously as she started back.

"Was it such a bitter dose, little angel?"

"You haf your pay—now tell!" she gasped, averting her face, her strong young arms encircling the trembling form of her blind father, as though feeling he would soon require some such support.

"The Franz Moskau I knew, lived at a mining-camp then known as the New Rush. He had a half-interest in a valuable mine called The Plenty."

The old man shivered, a faint groan coming from his lips. Amelia turned paler than ever, as though her worst suspicions were verified.

"That much we knew, long ago. It is after he left New Rush that we miss him," she uttered, forcing herself to utter the words, more to satisfy the father, than from aught of hope for fresher tidings.

"I'm breaking it to you, little by jerks, you see, little angel," laughed Ugly Dan, with that wolfish smile. "If you know so much; you also know that the worthy Franz left New Rush in something of a hurry: between two days, not to put too fine a point on it!"

"It is blind words he speaks, Melie! I cannot see what they mean! Is it anything against our poor boy?" muttered Herman Moskau, brushing one thin hand across his sightless eyes.

"You want plain talk? Good enough! I'll give it to you with the bark on, then! That was when I first knew Franz Moskau. The second time I met him, and when we became such intimate friends, was when I had the exquisite pleasure of fitting a necktie about his throat, and sending him to glory—for stealing a horse!"

An indignant cry escaped the lips of the sister, but Herman Moskau apparently had his strength restored by those cruel words. His form was drawn proudly erect, his voice was strong and haughty, as he said:

"It is manly to insult a blind and feeble old man through his son—yes! You would not dare say so, if I was with eyes—you coward dog!"

"Bah!" and stepping lightly forward, Ugly Dan struck the old man across the lips with the back of one hand. "I killed your son—I would just as soon kill you, you canting beggar! But as for you, my little lump of sweetness," and he turned upon Amelia with the devil filling his eyes, "I have a better fate in store!"

"Look out for her claws, boss!" cried Blister, springing forward.

Maddened, realizing the terrible peril that threatened her, Amelia Moskau drew a small pistol from her pocket, and, with a choking cry, pointed it at the breast of the head rascal.

Only his cat-like activity saved Ugly Dan from a richly-merited doom. The weapon exploded, but his right hand knocked its muzzle aside sufficient to carry the lead clear of his body, though the missile fairly grazed his ribs.

Herman Moskau, his olden spirit fully aroused, sprung forward at the sharp cry which broke from the lips of his child, and blindly sought to grapple with the athletic ruffian. Ugly Dan easily avoided his blind charge, and with a cruel blow beneath the ear with clinched fist, sent the

old man reeling away, to be promptly knocked down by Blister.

"Shell I salivate the cantankerous critter, boss?" he cried, kneeling on the insensible minstrel, his right hand uplifted, clasping a bare blade. "Shell I punch his ticket fer over the divide?"

Ugly Dan hesitated for a moment—a pause that was almost fatal to Herman Moskau, for the ruffian gripped his murderous weapon tighter and felt for the faintly-throbbing heart—then uttered:

"Not just yet. He may come in handy if this dainty bit of flesh and blood tries to cut up too rusty. Make sure he don't come charging along again, though."

All this time Amelia was striving to free herself from that loathsome embrace, too busy to think of screaming. And of what use? Who in that wild, remote region would hear and answer such an appeal?

With a laugh that was half a curse, Ugly Dan now made use of both hands, catching and confining the maiden's wrists, laughing anew as he bent her backward until she was helpless, until her face lay along his left arm, her lips wholly at his mercy.

"Screech away, my dainty music-box! I've got you right—"

A snarling curse came to his lips as he caught the sound of rapid hoof-strokes approaching the spot, and snatching a revolver from his belt, he whirled about to defend his prize.

An instant later the rider came dashing around the bend, and Ugly Dan flung up his pistol-hand—only to lower it as rapidly, while a grating curse of surprise and chagrin came up in his throat.

"Hands off, you cur! Release the lady, or die!" came sharply over a leveled revolver.

CHAPTER V.

A HARD PAIR TO DRAW AGAINST.

SHARP and peremptory came these words over the leveled tube as the good horse was reined in with a steady hand, when still a dozen yards distant from the little camp-fire. And Ugly Dan knew enough of the speaker to feel sure each and every word was really meant, too.

Yet that speaker was a woman!

With a savage snarl he showed his teeth, but it was only in that first start of surprise that he showed any signs of freeing his prize.

"You heard my song, Daniel? Don't make me repeat it, I beg of you!"

A trifle harder, a little less musical sounded the tones, and it seemed as though the nut-brown eyes flashed more vividly over the revolver-barrel, and with quick glances one at the other, Tom Wacker and Blister crouched low, and began to steal out of range to either side.

"You too, fellows!" sharply cried the beautiful amazon, detecting this movement, and apparently suspecting treachery on their part. "Hold your places, unless you want a more particular invitation—round, and lead-color! I've got one for each of you, if I am obliged to waste them. You understand?"

Beyond a doubt they did understand, for with marvelous promptness both Blister and Tom Wacker checked their hasty retreat, the latter, with a sickly grin and fawning tone uttering:

"Wouldn't putt ye to so much trouble fer a gold-mine, we wouldn't, ma'am! Good—Lawd—no, sir!"

A savage snarl escaped the grating teeth of Ugly Dan as he heard this, but his glowing eyes never once removed from the fair face beyond—and a fair face it really was, despite a certain spice of recklessness and dare-devilism.

"Good! You are not half the fools you look!" and a short, mellow laugh came through the red lips, to be cut short with the words: "And you, Ugly Daniel, will make money by taking pattern after their example. Must I repeat my—"

"It's not your chip in, widow," growled the ruffian, his eyes on fire, his voice filled with deadly menace, mixed with impatience. "You go your way, and keep your dainty fingers out of my game. I don't want to have a row with you, but—"

"You will have unless you set that girl free, Ugly Dan!" was the clear, incisive interjection, and it seemed as though the fair face grew older and harder as the rascal looked.

"I don't want it, but if it must come, all right," was the slow retort. "I wouldn't crowd it, if I were you, widow. I'm only a man, after all, with a spice of Mormonism in my blood. I may take a notion to make it a double-header, if you crowd me too close!"

A hot flush came into the woman's face as she caught these words, as she saw the vicious glitter which filled those black eyes. A half-stifled sound passed her clinched teeth, and her finger contracted on the trigger of her weapon, the report ringing out sharp and clear.

But she had to do with a cunning adversary; one who had carried his life in his hand for years past; who had learned to read the brain through the eye; to act with lightning quickness when the need came.

Ugly Dan knew that his taunt would bring a shot, and he ducked his head, leaping swiftly

to one side, still retaining his grasp on Amelia Moskau, despite her struggles to free herself. And then, before the enraged woman could realize her failure, he rose erect, his pistol covering her brain, a mocking laugh parting his lips.

"Just like a woman! If you want to hit me, why don't you aim at one of those cowering rascals over yonder?"

"Not me!" hurriedly spluttered Blister, crouching still lower.

"Durned ef I'm in the game, a-tall!" cried Tom Wacker.

The fair rider paid no attention to the lesser rascals, her pistol following the movements of Ugly Dan, her brown eyes filling with a reddish light, her voice sharp and menacing:

"Release that girl, Dan Bannison!"

"Jealous?" sneered the rascal. "Bah! there's enough for two, any day, and your share's waiting your—"

"Set her free, I tell you, dog! If she is not at liberty before I count ten, I'll bore your evil brain with a bullet!"

"If I fail to drop you as your dainty lips say *nine!*" cried Ugly Dan, with a sudden flaming forth of his brutal passions, his revolver covering the fair rider, his black eyes filled with murder.

She saw this, and despite her nerve—a nerve that had grown into a proverb almost in that section—her flushed cheeks grew a little paler, her pistol-hand dropped a trifle as her trim figure seemed to shrink from the threatened shot.

Ugly Dan laughed sneeringly as he noted this, and there was conscious victory in his tones as he added:

"It's my trick, widow, and the wisest thing you can do is to turn to the rightabout and travel about your own business. I don't want to spoil your beauty; my old pard might kick up a row at the loss or injury of his bright, particular treasure, and I'd rather keep on his good side, if it can be done without too much trouble. But you can't come in here. It's a private game, and I prefer to play it to the sweet end without your yes or no. Is that plain enough, my dear? Or, if you *will* have it, I can shoot a woman as well as a man!"

There were very few men who would care to face Ugly Dan when in this fiercely playful mood; fewer still in that section who would not have betrayed far more agitation and fear when under his deadly aim, than did this woman whom he called widow.

She was no ordinary woman, this widow Mercy Watkins, in either outward looks or inward qualities. Good Leather was more than proud of her, and probably Ugly Dan was the only man who claimed a citizenship in that lively camp who would have dared stand up before her pistol while her nut-brown eyes filled with the light of anger, much less have drawn a weapon on her in return.

There was but little of the traditional border-american in her face, voice or figure, under ordinary circumstances. She was hardly up to the average of her sex in height, though her figure was trim-built and gracefully rounded, now admirably set off by her neatly fitting riding-habit—one that would not have seemed out of place in a city park, only for the weapons which were supported by the belt about her round waist.

Her small face was as clear and pink-white as that of a baby, but her features were clear-cut, showing character and decision. Her eyes were nut-brown, a shade darker than her hair. Her mouth small, her lips red and a thought full, arched in a true Cupid's bow. Her chin rounded and daintily dimpled. Her throat white and shapely. Her figure well developed, without being either too plump or not plump enough.

Such, in outward seeming, was the woman who so boldly faced Ugly Dan, a terror to stout men when in a mood like the present.

She came to Good Leather soon after it began to attract attention in mining circles, and apparently she came to stay. She came alone, but it took scant time for the rough diggers to conclude that "the widow" was a little army in her own self.

She apparently had an abundance of money, and spent it with a free hand whenever the occasion demanded. She "put up a corner" in lumber, and kept the little saw-mill running for her particular benefit until she had sufficient to erect a building such as few mining-camps in their infant days dared imagine, much less expect to see. For where so much wood is required to make tunnels and shafts secure, there is ordinarily precious little wasted in upper-world building.

Not until the two-story structure was complete, inside and out, did widow Mercy Watkins deign to give even a hint as to its uses; but then a sign was hung out, the same which we have seen when Howling Jonathan drew up with a flourish after his break-neck drive, "MY HOUSE."

As a hotel, My House was a success; as a landlady, widow Mercy Watkins proved even greater. Her pluck deserved success, reasoned the miners, and to prove the correctness of their judgment, they took every pains to guard against its failure. A lack of day boarders or

lodgers never was known after the day My House first opened its doors for patronage; the trouble was to decide which ones should be excluded.

Once or twice since her coming to Good Leather, the widow had been called upon to show a pluck and nerve not often bestowed on the fair sex, and each time did she prove equal to the occasion, without calling for aid or backing, though nearly every hand in Good Leather would have been raised in her behalf if necessary.

Reckless, vicious though he was, Ugly Dan would have thought twice before meeting the widow after this fashion, if his evil passions had been less thoroughly aroused.

If these people had not been connected with a certain dark page of his past history, he would have yielded even now, knowing that should the widow ever tell her story to Good Leather, he would have to fight hard to keep his neck free from the rope. But the hatred he had once felt for Franz Moskau was now turned upon this blind man and his beautiful daughter; for hatred it was, though that touch of Amelia's ripe lips sent the hot blood leaping through his veins, fully arousing a devil that, at the best, but slumbered lightly.

The widow was woman of the world enough to read much of this in that devilishly handsome face, but she gave little sign of fear, and after that first involuntary flinching, her fair face hardened, her nut-brown eyes flashed, her voice grew cold and stern as she began to count, slowly, deliberately, but steadily as fate itself.

"At nine, I'll spoil your beauty, widow!" grated Ugly Dan, his jetty eyes glowing like living coals. "If I have to, blame yourself for—Ha! I thought your nerve would fail you!" and he laughed mockingly as her voice broke off short.

A laugh came as in echo to his own, and instead of fear, triumph filled the face of the fair rider.

"It is to give you one more chance for life, Ugly Dan!" she cried in ringing tones. "I don't want to stain my hand with the life of a foul cur like you! Release that girl. Down on your knees and beg her pardon. Swear to go off and hang yourself, and I'll let you escape!"

There was more of rage than mirth in the laugh with which Ugly Dan greeted his sharp, scornful speech.

"You've got things all your own way, haven't you? Bah! it's my say so, and—"

He never finished the sentence. A sharp report rung out on the still air, and a savage yell of mingled rage and pain was wrung from his lips as the revolver dropped from his hand—as the blood flew in a crimson spray—as the member fell helplessly to his side, his fingers shattered terribly by a bullet!

"After me is manners, Ugly Dan!" cried a clear, sharp voice, and as the crippled ruffian whirled about with his left hand groping for a weapon, his eyes glaring savagely, his white teeth showing wolfishly, he beheld a tall, erect figure, a white face confronting him over the top of a leveled revolver.

"Iceberg Dave!" he grated, shrinking a trifle.

"Correct, Ugly Dan," was the prompt retort. "Shall I waste another bullet on you, or are you less hog than you look?"

There was no reply in words, but Ugly Dan made no further attempt to arm himself, and even shrunk back a pace or two. Not even those cold and scornful words could nerve him then; nor yet the light, mocking laugh that parted the red lips of the widow.

Though his right hand was hopelessly crippled, the knuckles shattered by the deftly planted lead; though the odds were all against him, with a revolver covering his brain; had any man save Iceberg Dave Ingram been behind that weapon, Ugly Dan would have risked all for revenge. But of all Good Leather, this white-faced, cold-blooded sport, who seemed absolutely without nerves, was the one man for whom Ugly Dan felt anything like respect or fear.

"Hold him level, David!" cried the widow, sharply, as she shifted her aim toward the lesser rascals who were once more in motion. "I'll look after these two brutes, never fear!"

"It's us that's fearin', ma'am," and Blister grinned faintly. "All we wants is to git out o' the way so the big-bugs kin spread thair own selves. We throws up our hand, don't we, par?"

"Fer sure!" gasped Tom Wacker. "An' ef that ain't a plenty, I reckon I could throw up my boots, an' not hafe try!"

"Freeze right fast where you are, you rascals!" sharply cried the widow, still holding them under her weapon. "Your punishment depends on yonder girl. If you have killed that old man, nothing—"

The instant the wounded villain released her, Amelia sprung to the side of her father, lifting his blood-stained head to her bosom, pressing her lips to his, sobbing, calling to him in broken sentences, fearing the worst. But a glad cry broke from her lips as his eyes slowly opened and a tremor ran through his frame.

It was this that cut short the menacing speech of widow Mercy, and for the moment forgetting the ruffians, she leaped to the ground and hastened to the daughter's aid.

Blister cast a sly glance over his shoulder, only to shrink back as he caught an icy look from the white-faced sport.

"You've got your orders, lads. Break them if you are weary of life," coldly uttered Iceberg Dave.

"The good Lawd! we hain't done nothin', boss!" gasped Wacker.

"If you only had, curse you both!" snarled Ugly Dan, holding up his crippled hand and shaking it until the red drops fell over his craven tools. "If you had only used your eyes! If you would even yet—"

"That wouldn't save you, Dan," coldly interposed Iceberg Dave, his thin lips curling. "It's the last turn, and you've called it wrong."

"Show out, then, curse ye!" snarled the villain, viciously. "Finish it up, and don't stand there crowing over a crippled man!"

"Time enough, Daniel," was the cool retort. "I'm only a deck-hand this trip. When the captain gives the signal, I'll do my part. Until she does, hold your soul in patience, old boy!"

Blister and Tom Wacker interchanged covert glances. They knew that by their pusillanimous conduct thus far they had won the undying enmity of the desperado. They knew that he would never forget nor forgive. If he escaped with life from this predicament, their own breath could be prolonged only by hasty and enghy flight.

This being so, they could lose nothing by courting favor of the man who held the game in his hands, while they might possibly gain something, if only a lessening of their deserved punishment.

"We've done too durn much on your say-so, a'ready, cuss ye!" Tom Wacker growled showing his teeth. "You made us do it—you cussed an' swore an' said you'd blow us to never—"

"Easy, Daniel!" warningly uttered Iceberg Dave, as Ugly Dan gave a snarling curse of furious rage. "And you, fellows, bite your tongue until it chokes off your lies. I know him, and I know you. That's enough."

It was too much, Wacker thought, and Blister heartily though silently echoed the same disagreeable conviction.

Meanwhile the widow was aiding Amelia to restore Herman Moskau to consciousness, succeeding beyond their hopes. Knowing how terribly the poor man had been excited, how intensely his feelings had been wrought up, and how bitter must be the shock as he realized that all was a vile lie, Amelia feared for his brain. But fortunately this dread proved to be baseless. If anything, the blind man was stronger, clearer brained than before.

Seeing this, and feeling that the recovery would be even more complete were the father and daughter left to themselves for a little while, the widow turned away and spoke to Iceberg Dave:

"It is like you, Mr. Ingram; always on hand when your services are most needed! Some time I will try to thank you as you deserve!"

The white face flushed, and the long lashes drooped over the big gray eyes. The hand that held the pistol shook ever so faintly, though it had never done so before an enemy. And as she saw this, a similar confusion seemed to attack the fair landlady.

"To serve you, Mrs. Watkins, is its own reward," quietly uttered the sport, quickly conquering his emotions, once more the ice-cold sport all the rest of Good Leather knew.

"If old Mallison could only hear that!" maliciously cried Ugly Dan, though he knew he was increasing his peril by so doing.

"Another word, and you'll hear the foul fiend welcoming your coming home, cur!" grated Iceberg Dave, his face white as a corpse.

"A cripple—I kiss your hand, mighty chief!"

"May I?" grated Ingram, turning his flashing eyes toward the woman whose slightest word was his law and gospel.

Widow Mercy Watkins hesitated, her brows contracting, a hard, unwomanly light filling her brown eyes until they shone redly. Ugly Dan held his breath and turned a shade whiter, for he knew that his life hung by the frailest thread. But he made no outward sign, uttered not a word in pleading. He could not, to Iceberg Dave.

"No," at length uttered the widow. "You have crippled his right hand, and that will cut off half his power for evil. But you needn't begin to exult, you cowardly cur!" she flashed out as her keen eyes detected the swift light that leaped into the villain's orbs, despite himself. "Your punishment is only begun. You've got to remember this day's work as long as Satan lets you curse the earth with your vile breath."

"Say how, Mrs. Watkins, and I'll carry out your will or break his back trying," quietly uttered Iceberg Dave.

"First, to draw his fangs," quoth the little woman, as she drew her jeweled knife and deftly slashed in two the belt about his waist, without placing herself within his reach. "Step a little to one side, you cur! This is my best riding-

habit, and I don't want it ruined by coming in contact with your vile person!"

With a sickly smile, Ugly Dan obeyed, knowing that his only hope for vengeance lay in quiet submission. That was hard, to one of his naturally overbearing disposition, but it would be still harder to have to leave the world without even an effort to even up his injuries.

"With the toe of her boot, widow Watkins thrust the belt of arms to one side, then turned upon the lesser rascals. But before she could utter a word, they were disarming, grinning after a sickly fashion as they placed their belts at her feet.

"Ef we ain't needed no more, mebbe you'd hev Iceberg jes' kick us out o' camp, ma'am?" whined Blister, licking his parched lips.

"The money—they robbed us!" cried Amelia, quickly.

"He made us hold it fer him while he went fer the lady!" hurriedly spluttered Wacker, as pale as dirt and grime would permit.

"That's the truth an' never a lie at all, ma'am!" echoed Blister, as they hurriedly emptied their pockets of their ill-gotten gains. "We didn't want to do nothin', but he would hev it so—durn him!"

"How was it, my dear?" asked widow Watkins, turning to Amelia.

"They was bad, but he was baddest!" exclaimed the maiden, flushing with the remembrance.

"They the money took, but he—"

"It makes nothing, little girl," gravely interposed the blind man. "It is not revenge that brings our Franz once again. We will go our way, and nefer more think of such wicked mans like him. He is more bad off as we, for he mocks the blind and insults the innocent. Come, 'Melie—it is long roat ahead of us! It is long time pefore we find our poor boy! The world is so wide—so big place to hunt over!"

The widow had to wink hard and fast to clear her eyes before she could see just where the blind man's arm was. She grasped it kindly, at last and with true gentility he stood still, awaiting her pleasure.

"It is her dues—it is only right that the vile wretch who dared to insult her, should be humbled before her eyes. Until then, I beg of you to be patient."

"It is plenty patience you learn when searching through the big world for something you can nefer find, lady," was the meek reply. "It shall be so, since you ask. It was you that come to help 'Melie."

"You two rascals can pull out as soon as you like," said the widow Watkins, turning to Blister and Wacker. "If you want to sleep comfortably, though, I wouldn't curse Good Leather with my presence for a few weeks, if I were you. Is that hint plain enough?"

"Plain as a kick, an' heap more comfortable, ma'am," grinned Wacker. "Mebbe you wouldn't mind us takin' our tools?"

"I would, slightly," interposed Iceberg Dave. "Be thankful that you get off so easy. Skin out—and no more whining!"

The two rascals shuffled away, knowing that their best chance lay in gaining such a start of Ugly Dan as to obviate the necessity of weapons to defend their lives. If they had only secured their tools, they might have taken to cover and made all safe by getting in the first blow, before Ugly Dan could call them to account.

Iceberg Dave glanced at widow Watkins, and she nodded slightly.

"It's 'die dog or eat the hatchet,' this round, Ugly Dan," he said, coldly, but with a twinkle in his gray eyes that told how thoroughly he enjoyed this humiliation of the one man in Good Leather who had dared to set himself up as a sort of rival "chief." You heard what Mrs. Watkins said. You have insulted a lady—two of them, in fact—and the least you can do is to knuckle down and beg their pardons."

It was a bitter pill, but Ugly Dan nerved himself to take it, by reflecting that only thus could he hope for a chance to get even. Without a word he dropped on his knees, and slowly uttered:

"I was wrong. I have acted like a brute. am too low and mean and degraded to be fit to live. But I trust the lady—both of the ladies—will forgive me for what I have done. I pledge myself to never offend again in like manner, if I am pardoned this time."

Not even Iceberg Dave could find fault with the words or the manner of delivery. One who knew him slightly, would have thought Ugly Dan a thoroughly repentant man. And it was with the same quiet tones that he added, looking up into the face of his conqueror:

"Is that sufficient? If there is anything more, say the words and I will repeat them after you."

"It is plenty enough," hastily interposed Herman Moskau, his thin face flushing a little, his honest heart feeling pain that a fellow-man should be thus humbled on their account. "It is too much, I think, that a man must talk so—not, 'Melie?"

"It is so, my father! Let him go his ways, please, and we will go ours. It is time we lose so, and—"

"Yes, yes, yes! It is precious time losen, and

Franz waiting some place for his dear ones!" hurriedly muttered the blind man, turning away. "It is long road, 'Melie, but the good Lord will make it come by an end after a little! It is that gives me heart to keep up. Yes, it is time to be off going! 'Melie?"

"Yes, father; I make Neddy fast up in a hurry, now!"

Widow Watkins hesitated a moment, but then said:

"If they are content, I am satisfied. Let him go, David."

"My thanks to you, Mrs. Watkins," and Ugly Dan bowed low, smiling after a sickly fashion. "And you, Iceberg, good-by! May we meet again!"

With these words the fellow turned on his heel and strode away, never once glancing back, his crippled hand swinging unheeded by his side. And thus it was when he vanished from their sight around the bend in the road, leading to Good Leather.

"A black heart—if heart it can be called!" muttered Iceberg.

"And by far too quiet!" the widow said, her fair brows contracting and her little hands nervously fingering the hilt of her knife. "He means mischief, or he'd never go off like that! I'm almost sorry your lead did not shatter his skull, instead of his hand!"

"I feared for your life, or his skull it would have been, Mercy," and Iceberg Dave came a little nearer, his voice strangely softened, his gray eyes, usually so cold and hard, now shining soft and tender. "But it is not too late, even yet. I'll take his tools to him, and then empty his skull, if you say the word. That is my law, Mercy!"

Widow Watkins flushed, then turned pale, drawing back as Iceberg Dave made a motion as though to capture her hand. She laughed, short and uneasily as she cast a hurried glance around them. Her voice was far from steady as she said:

"I have no right to give you orders, Mr. Ingram!"

"You have—if you only so elect, Mercy!" he quickly breathed.

"I have not—I wish it not," she said, with sudden coldness. "You know why, without my telling, Mr. Ingram; so say no more."

He bowed, stiffly, once more Iceberg Dave.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHIEF OF GOOD LEATHER.

"It rests with you how much further Ugly Dan travels, Mrs. Watkins. What you gave you can take back again, and a life like his must be a curse and a burden," quietly uttered the sport.

"You would follow him—after what—"

There was a spice of the coquette in widow Mercy, else she would not have managed such a shy look out of the shade of those curving lashes. Her voice would not have been so low, so filled with surprise; nor would it have broken off with that curious little gasp, as though emotion was overpowering her. For she knew well enough that Iceberg Dave, so cold and hard and merciless to all the rest of the world, would be like wax in her hands if she so elected; that he would bathe his hands in blood without an instant's hesitation at a single motion from her hand or head.

But the pet faro-dealer of Good Leather had not so soon forgotten the lesson read him by the fair widow, and there was not the slightest trace of emotion in his face or voice as he responded:

"Why not? It is on my road to town, and I'll have to punch the fellow's ticket on my own account if I don't on yours."

"If I thought so—if I thought the rascal would try to play you foul for this day's work," and there came a reddish glow into the nut-brown eyes, a clinching of the small, gloved hands, that was far more flattering to the man who stood ready to carry out her slightest wish than a dozen shy glances and quavering tones.

Still Iceberg Dave gave no sign, and few who saw or heard him then would have even dreamed how madly, insanely, he was in love with this little woman.

"That goes without saying, ma'am. Daniel is not an angel, whatever he may become before I get through with him. He'll naturally try to get even with the game, and won't let his hair frost before calling the turn—for me or for himself."

The widow hesitated, but it was only for an instant. Her voice was low, but sharp and stern, as she uttered:

"Then follow and settle him! You are too valuable a friend—"

"I don't want to hurry the procession, ma'am," interposed Iceberg Dave, with a characteristic squaring of his firm jaws. "If it is on my account that you are changing your mind—"

"A woman's privilege, is it not?" with a little laugh.

"That settles it," bowed the gambler.

The widow arched her fine brows a little as

Iceberg Dave drew back a pace, folding his arms across his chest.

"You fail me, Mr. Ingram?" she murmured, softly.

"It is your game, ma'am. Mine was only a little side-bet. Daniel paid that, but I took the hint and drew out. I was ready to slip a copper on the knave, when I fancied you wished me to, but—"

"Is it Greek you are talking, my dear sir?" laughed the widow.

"The shop will slip in occasionally, ma'am, but I'll try to make my meaning clear. To do you a service, I was ready to lay out Ugly Dan, but when I saw that you were worrying only on my account, as a possibly valuable aid to—a friend of yours, that altered the case entirely. I can wait, and so can Ugly Dan."

There was one little break in the cold, even tones of the gambler, barely perceptible, more like a catch in his breath than aught else; but it was sufficient to bring a flush to the cheeks of widow Watkins and to make her answer shorter, less frank than it might otherwise have been.

"Thanks for the service you rendered me, Mr. Ingram. If you would only be as kind to yourself!"

She turned away and hurried over to where Amelia Moskau was putting the harness on the little donkey, preparatory to hitching him to the cart.

Herman Moskau, forgetting all else in the bitterness of his disappointment, leaned against the lightning-scarred tree, his head bowed, tears silently trickling down his thin cheeks and over his beard.

It was the one object of his life, this finding the long lost son. Scores of times had he met with disappointment just when his loving faith told him success was close at hand, but never before had he felt it so intensely as now. Ugly Dan had played his cruel part so well, had so mercilessly lied and fed the fires of hope, that the blow fell with double force at last.

"That ugly rascal did not hurt you much, my dear?" asked the widow as Amelia turned with a grateful smile through her tears.

"Hurt? yes! But it was in the heart the most, lady!" and Amelia hastily averted her face as the hot tears came anew. "It was because he made poor father—he was not always so, as you see, lady. He was strong and could see then, before brother Franz went away and never no more come back again home to us. That was the worst—that was the thing broke him down so bad. Franz was his son—I, only a girl."

A woman herself, widow Watkins could understand just what this quiet little quaver meant, and acting on the impulse of the moment, she caught Amelia in her arms, and—Iceberg Dave turned his face hastily away, striding over to the old blind man.

"Traveling, I reckon, uncle?" he said, briskly. "Going to make any stop at our town? Good Leather we call it."

Herman Moskau roused himself, brushing the tears from his face, a wan smile crossing his care-worn features as he said:

"It is foolish-weak the old people get, sometimes, my friend, as you see by me. *Ach!* time was—but you ask question, I believe?"

"Only hoping that you mean to take in our town before going further, uncle. It's many a long mile you might travel before seeing—"

It was not often that Iceberg made a wrong play, but just now his nerves were strung up so tightly that before he thought the words fell from his lips. Herman Moskau smiled faintly.

"It is great hardship to lose sight—yes. But there many thing more worse than that, my friend. To haf no eyes—that take one great pleasure away, but to lose a dear son—that take all, everything!"

Iceberg Dave started, casting a hasty glance about him, for the moment fancying that he had come too late to discover the worst deeds of Ugly Dan. And Herman Moskau, with the wonderful intuition with which some blind persons are gifted, seemed to read his thoughts, for he quickly uttered:

"Not so—not that way, my good sir! It was long ago that I lose my boy—so long, it seems like I must be older as the world! I haf looked so many places! I haf said to myself, this time the good God will surely let the glad day be! And now, that wicked man say he can bring us by our boy! He swear he know him like a brother! He ask for pay, and we gif him all—what is money and things by our love for Franz? No more as dust! And then, he say—*ach!* it was bitter black sin! He say my boy was hung for horse-thieving! He say he pull rope—*mein Got!*"

"He was lying, of course, uncle."

"For sure it was lie!" quickly proudly, uttered the blind man, his thin cheeks flushing. "It needs not stranger lips to tell me that. It was not that maken the heart so sick, no! It was to think we must still further look for our boy. Unless," and there was a sudden eagerness in his voice, a trembling of his frame, a quick catching of his breath, as he added: "If you could say, good man—if you might haf seen my boy—if you knew where we must look to find him?"

"Franz, you say?"

"Franz Moskau—see!" and the poor old man held forth the card containing the face of his son.

Iceberg Dave took it, and as he did so, abruptly turned his back toward the blind minstrel. Why? What made his gray eyes fill with such a sudden fire? Or, was it only the change of light that brought that grayish shade over his face?

It must have been something of the sort, for he turned back and slipped the card into the trembling hand, his voice as quiet and full of sympathy as before.

"I do not know him, I am sorry to say. But there may be some one in Good Leather who can put you on the right track. At least it will do no harm to try."

"It is there we was going when that evil man came to us. It is new place, so we look there, too. The day must come. It may be so near to us as this place Good Leather. Yes, we go there. 'Melie?"

"Yes, father," was the hurried reply. "In one little minute all will ready be, now!"

Widow Watkins had not been idle during this passage between Iceberg Dave and the old man. She had learned that the travelers were on their way to Good Leather, and though she was forced to give the same answer as Iceberg Dave to the question whether she could tell aught of the missing brother, she ventured far more encouragement than the gambler offered.

"You will be safe there, my dear. I am only a woman, but those silly fellows regard me as highly as though I were an angel! For my sake they will help you find your brother."

Amelia, greatly comforted and not a little encouraged, managed to whisper something of this in the ear of her father, who bent his white head and almost reverently pressed his lips to the gloved hand.

And then, with the blind minstrel seated in the cart, Iceberg Dave leading the donkey, while Amelia perched on the horse behind the widow, the little cavalcade took its departure from the noonday camp, moving toward Good Leather.

The widow seemed in a particularly joyous mood, and her merry laugh more than once brought a similar sound to the lips of her new pet, while Herman Moskau smiled faintly as he listened.

Iceberg Dave, cool and wary, kept a close lookout as they proceeded, for some sign of Ugly Dan Bennison. But that worthy had either busily improved the time in fast traveling, or else had turned aside from the main trail, perhaps to bandage his crippled hand. At any rate, nothing was seen of him before Good Leather was gained.

Before entering town, Amelia insisted on alighting from the horse and resuming her wonted place as driver. Iceberg Dave was nothing loth to relinquish his position at Neddy's head, and he fell back a few yards, though still keeping near enough to lend a hand should Ugly Dan have reached town before them and should try to "get even."

Widow Watkins drew rein before My House, leaping to the ground before Iceberg Dave could come to aid her. She gave her horse to the nimble, tough-looking lad who ran out from the saloon attached to the hotel, then turned to her new-found friends, saying cheerily:

"Welcome to My House, both! It shall be your house as long as you care to stop in Good Leather, and it shall cost you nothing but goodwill! I have said it, and my word is law, if not gospel!"

As she spoke, she was aiding Herman Moskau to alight, and leading him toward the door of the hotel. But with her last words the old man stopped short, his voice steady and even proud as he said:

"It is very kind and good-hearted you are, lady, and we thank you many times over for that. But it is not such beggars that we are, my little girl and me—no! We will stop for a while, but it is better we camp out, or go to an inn where—"

"But this is an inn, and I am the landlady, dear sir," laughed the Widow Watkins. "I have no master, and if I say you are my friends—if I refuse to take pay for the little I can do, who will dare deny my right? Not you, my dear sir!"

"Not if you so forbid, kind lady," and the blind minstrel bent his head over the gloved hand which held his. "It will leave more gold to carry us longer by our look for our Franz!"

As he began speaking, the door before them, which led into a passage by means of which the upper story might be gained without entering the office and bar combined, swung open and a stout, well-dressed man paused abruptly before them. A look of surprise came into his face as he noticed the widow Watkins in such company, and then a sharp sound—if not a curse, it very much resembled one!—broke from his lips as he wheeled and vanished inside.

A still brighter light leaped into the brown eyes of the little woman as she gazed after the vanishing shape, but then she laughed softly and pushed open the closing door, leading her strange guests into the entry, saying:

"I will take you right up to your rooms,

where I trust you will make yourselves comfortable and wholly at home. I will change my dress and hasten back to you, for I am dying to hear your story!"

She led the way up the narrow flight of stairs, making no sign as her quick eyes caught a momentary glimpse of a door ajar, through which swiftly waved a white hand. She gave father and child rooms adjoining each other, and after a few kind words, left them alone.

Her brows were contracted, her lips tightly compressed as she caught sight of the stout man descending the stairs, pausing at the foot of them just long enough to repeat his imperative signal, then vanishing.

"What's up now, I wonder?" she muttered, her brown eyes snapping with anything but an amiable light as she followed, entering a rear room which might be called a parlor. "You wanted me, Mallison?"

The stout man was awaiting her coming, his full, florid face hard-set and an ugly look in his eyes.

"Would I take all this trouble if I didn't want you?" he said, in a harsh, almost brutal tone as he dropped upon a stuffed sofa. "Of course I want you—a fool would know that much!"

"Perhaps that is why I come to you for the information, dear," softly smiled the widow, making a mocking little courtesy. "But want will have to be your master, at least until I can change my dress and get some of this dust off. If you are in too great a hurry to wait, I will try hard to survive the shock, my dear!"

Another courtesy and then away she sailed, leaving Colonel Joel Mallison to calm himself as best he might.

It was not a very agreeable picture that the colonel presented, just then, and many in Good Leather would have required a second look before recognizing the smooth, polite, suave gentlemen they were accustomed to seeing in that garb.

He was barely up to the medium height of his sex, but what he lacked in altitude, he made up in breadth of person. His shoulders were broad, his body thick and by no means graceful. There was a stoop to his shoulders, though this did not show so much on ordinary occasions, thanks to his full chest and dignified erectness. His limbs were short and thick, his feet and hands large. His hands were white, and bore but slight signs of the hard labor they had done in his younger days.

His face was full and florid, looking still redder from the suspicious blackness of his hair and heavy mustaches. His eyes were of a light blue, set close together, small and just now filled with an ugly reddish glow. His other features were heavy, almost coarse, his jaws being remarkably wide and strong, giving him something the look of a bull-dog.

Perhaps it was this look that helped give Good Leather the impression that Colonel Mallison would prove a tough nut for even the hardest hammer to crack, for such certainly was the general belief, though up to this time he had never been put to the test.

If he was "chief" of Good Leather, it was through his lavish use of money, his daring speculations, his suavity, coupled with an occasional show of jollity with "the bloods."

Joel Mallison did some hard thinking while waiting for widow Watkins, and he had time to realize his folly in speaking and acting so roughly. At all events, when she made her reappearance in a fresh dress, his tone was much more civil, his voice softer and more like that of a gentleman.

"I'm glad you've come, little woman!"

"And I'm glad to find another person here from the one I left," pointedly responded the widow, her eyes still snapping sharply.

"I ask your pardon. I was so excited—"

"Over what, may I ask?"

Colonel Mallison hesitated, but only for a moment. He rose and passed one arm about the trim waist, bending over until he could gaze directly into the brown eyes. A brief space thus, then he drew her to a seat beside him on the sofa, saying:

"I will tell you the whole truth, little woman, only—who were those persons I saw you with?"

Apparently the widow had taken a second thought. She seemed quite willing to accept the truce, and her reply was prompt enough:

"An old blind man and his daughter. I met them while out riding."

"Why did you bring them here?" asked Mallison, watching her keenly through his shaggy brows, for it seemed to him that she had cut herself short while on the point of saying something more.

Widow Watkins laughed a little, almost ashamedly.

"Well—you won't think I am growing soft, Joel?"

"Did you ever do anything I found fault with, little woman?"

His voice was soft and almost caressing as he uttered these words, but it was easy to see he was ill at ease. At any other time the woman would have been quick to note this fact, but somehow she herself felt a trifle disturbed as the

handsome face of Iceberg Dave appeared to pass before her eyes.

"They were so poor!—he is blind, and she so pretty, so innocent! And then they were coming to Good Leather, anyway, so I asked them to stay here."

"Coming to Good Leather!" echoed Mallison, biting his thumb-nail viciously, his little eyes glowing strangely.

His uneasiness was so plain that the widow could not avoid noting the fact, and instantly her curiosity was awakened.

"Do you know them, Joel? Did you ever meet them?"

"As you came in—yes," was the hasty reply, as he lifted his head, laughing shortly.

"Before that, I mean! You have! I can see it in your eyes!" cried widow Watkins, her brown eyes sparkling. "You seemed startled at the sight of the old man—or was it the girl?"

There was a fresh suspicion in voice and face, now, and the colonel forced another laugh as he made answer, with clumsy playfulness:

"Careful, little woman! If any other ears should happen to hear you now, they would be mighty apt to set you down as jealous of your new lodger!"

"You know better than that, Joel," with a curl of her red lip. "You know there can be no jealousy between you and me. You are simply a boarder, and I am widow Mercy Watkins, free as air!"

"All Good Leather knows as much, of course, just as they know that it is not my fault you still remain a widow. But a truce to this. You met these people by chance, you say?"

"Yes. Dave Ingram had just read Ugly Dan a lesson for insulting the girl—crippled his right hand, I believe—when I came on the scene," said the widow, apparently too modest to claim all the merit due her actions that day. "They seemed in want, and so I brought them here. My House can afford it, even if they don't pay their bills."

"You talked with them, of course? What sort of story did they tell you?" slowly asked the colonel, striving in vain to hide the interest with which he awaited her reply.

"Not much. They are looking for some one, a son, I believe, who has run away or been put out of the way, or—"

"Curse the foul luck that brought them to Good Leather!" grated Joel Mallison, striking his tightly-clinched fist against the sofa as he might have dashed it into the face of a hated enemy.

The widow turned pale, her eyes glowing, her voice growing hard.

"What has gone wrong now? You do know them, Joel! What are they to you? What have they done—or, what have you done?"

Mallison caught her arm and stared keenly into her face.

She read the question before it was spoken, and promptly said:

"It is a late day for you to ask whether or not I can be trusted, Joel! If you have a single doubt, keep it close to yourself."

He drew a long breath as he sunk back on the sofa seat, brushing one hand rapidly over his face, but his voice was far more natural as he spoke again:

"I do trust you, little woman. I will tell you everything—but not just now. First—I want you to get their whole story from them. Pump them dry, one after the other, and then see if they both tell the same story. You can do it—you will do it, little woman!"

"Of course, if you say so," was the prompt response. "But give me just a hint, so I'll know better what points to press the closest. You know something of this man, this missing Franz Moskau?"

Just then there came to their ears the sound of excited voices on the outside, and as they turned their heads to listen, they caught the sound of wild howls and sharp reports in the distance, rapidly growing louder and plainer, then mingling with the rattle of wheels.

"Something's gone wrong—it's the stage!" muttered Colonel Mallison, leaping to his feet and catching up his hat. "Remember! find out all you can from those two!"

There was more of relief than curiosity written upon his flushed countenance as he hurried from the room. He was not yet ready to make confession, even to one whom he felt could be so entirely trusted with dangerous secrets as the widow Watkins. This disturbance, coming just as it did, was a perfect godsend!

As the reader has already seen, it was the stage, with Howling Jonathan Hebrew handling the ribbons. Its mad progress had attracted attention before the foot of the long slope was reached, and the crowd rapidly gathered to learn the meaning of such reckless haste, giving vent to excited cries and unanswered questions. And when Howling Jonathan drew up before My House, he had an audience large enough to satisfy even his extravagant desires.

Colonel Joel Mallison opened the door and stopped short, amazed by the scene. Jonathan, his feet still holding Joe Duncan on the foot-board, was rattling off his wild address, introducing himself to the citizens of Good Leather. But as he caught sight of Colonel Mallison filling the

doorway directly opposite him, he rose to his feet with a complicated flourish of his right arm that sent out a pistol-like report from the braided lash, crying:

"Hellow, boss! How goes it, anyhow? Ef you ain't the postmaster, you look enough like him fer to be one, an' yar's your new patent male-bag! Chuck-full an' sloppin' over! Ye-up! stiddy by jerks, Josey!"

While speaking, the Howler stooped over and grasped Joe Duncan by the collar of his coat, lifting him clear of the foot-board and dropping him to the ground.

"Chuck-full o' registered packages, that male-bag is, boss! Han'le with keer, fer ef it should come untied, the good Moses save all them as is within range! Salt won't save 'em, nur soft-soap ever take out the stains, or make 'em smell sweet never no more!"

Limp, almost lifeless apparently, Joe Duncan dropped to the ground, a feeble groan breaking from his lips.

"What's happened? Give him air! Give him whisky's more sense!"

Those nearest crowded around the luckless driver, and while Jonathan was rattling on extravagantly, whisky was poured down the half-senseless fellow. It quickly produced the usual effect, and with a savage curse, Joe Duncan struggled to his feet, thrusting back his officious friends, brushing one hand across his bleared eyes, as he fumbled for a pistol. Even as his hand touched it, he caught sight of Howling Jonathan, and with a snarling curse he flung up his weapon and discharged it.

With a will yell the Howler turned a back somerset from the roof of the coach, only to dart under the low body between the wheels and knock the weapon from Duncan's grasp. Then, catching him by the middle, he twisted him from his feet, lifting him into the air with:

"I'm Howlin' Jonathan Hebrew, the Terror from Headwaters!"

With an effort that seemed superhuman, he tossed the driver above his head, then cast him endlong, straight at the amazed colonel! Head and stomach came in contact, and the owners of both fell backward! —

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOWLER HIT RIGHT WHAR HE LIVES!

"SUFFERIN' Moses! ef I hain't done it now, I hope I'm a liar!" ejaculated the Howler, holding up both hands in an attitude of holy horror as he stared wide-eyed at the heap of struggling humanity in the narrow entry. "Ram-jammed the male-bag clean through the postmaster, 'stead o' chuckin' it in the post-office! The—good—Lawd!"

At that savage curse and the pistol-shot, there was a hasty scatteration on the part of the crowd, so the Howler had nothing to interfere with his passage as he leaped forward and followed his novel missile, entering the hotel and turning about, with his rear thus guarded, all so naturally done that, probably, not one of the crowd, even those who sympathized most with luckless Joe Duncan, gave him credit for an ulterior motive in thus acting.

"Saints in ge-lory!" he spluttered, grasping the half-stunned driver and dexterously unfastening his belt of arms as he apparently wrestled with the weight, then rolling him unceremoniously outside as he stooped again to assist the gasping, cursing spectator. "Ef that clumsy critter hes bu'sted anythin', be durned ef I don't make him prove it ef it takes the hide off! Takin' a bay-winder like them fer a hole to go through! Drunk—that's what's the matter! Be durned ef he ain't drunk as— Damages?" he cried, as Colonel Joel Mallison uttered a sonorous oath. "Waal, I should remark! The jedge as wouldn't give ye heap big damages fer sech doin's, ain't fit to kerry truck to hogs! I'll be a witness, boss! I kin take me cath I see'd him jostle ye—rub up ag'inst ye right smart, an' never give a whistle to tell ye right or left han' side! It's a good cause fer action, boss, an' ef you'll make me your liar, I'll ketch a vardict fer one-hafe the plunder we git out o' it—be durned ef I don't, honey!"

Colonel Joel Mallison regained his feet, one hand pressing against the spot where the bullet head of Joe Duncan had come in violent contact, the other thrusting Jonathan back with more force than courtesy as he growled angrily:

"Give way, you clumsy brute, or I'll—"

"Oh, angels o' light an' ministers o' grease!" fairly squealed the Howler, every hair on his fiery head seeming to bristle with pure delight as he hopped rapidly from one foot to the other, dashing his battered hat to the floor, spitting on his hands and making other warlike demonstrations, greatly to the delight of the crowd gathered without. "Is that the chune, honey-love! It's a heap big fighter-man ye be, 'stead o' the postmaster, eh? Lord o' love, pard, but that hits me right whar I live when I'm to home! I'm a tough myself! I'm a chief, with fifty feathers in my skelp, an' each one tells of a 'way-up game-cock that crowed his last crew on the pint o' my gaffs! Come an' take your last salvation, honey! Come an' see me punch your ticket fer—"

Not a little to the surprise of the citizens who

were watching the scene, instead of at once knocking this rattle-tongued fellow down off hand, Colonel Joel Mallison shrunk back, his florid color turning to a sickly gray. And had it been any other than the acknowledged chief of Good Leather, a hoot of derision would almost certainly have gone up as for a coward.

Fortunately for the colonel, perhaps, an interruption came before the crowd could fully realize his shrinking from the ordeal.

Howling Jonathan abruptly ceased his wild outburst as a hand touched his shoulder from behind, and he wheeled quickly, to find a revolver muzzle staring him full in the face!

"You can't turn my house into a bear-garden, sir. Simmer down, take a walk, or have your baggage checked through for the boneyard. Take your choice of the three, and that in a hurry, too!"

It was widow Mercy Watkins who uttered these words, and those who know her best knew that she "meant business chuck-up" when she assumed that clear, incisive tone, when her nut-brown eyes filled with that peculiar reddish glow.

But the Howler did not appear to at all realize his peril. He seemed unconscious of the weapon whose muzzle almost touched the tip of his flaming-red nose. He had eyes only for the face and figure beyond. Truly, it looked like a case of love at first sight!

"I thought it sorter smacked o' heaven, an' now I knows it! But to think that my nozzle was 'intin' that way all the time—that's what gits me! Bad—mighty bad! It do so!" he muttered, slowly shaking his head like one confronted by a most perplexing enigma.

"That is decidedly too thin, my fine fellow," tartly added widow Watkins, stepping back a pace, apparently to guard against an attempt to knock her weapon aside. "You look fool enough to be crazy, but that excuse won't save you if you try to run things here according to your own sweet will. I'm mistress of this hotel, and—"

"An' you a lone woman!" ejaculated Jonathan, ineffable pity filling his face and voice. "It's a scandalous shame an' a blot onto the citizens o' Good Leather—it is so! I'm a pilgrim an' a stranger, but I'm too mighty white fer to stan' that when I kin make it any more fittin'. From right on, honey, count me your head-bouncer. An' ef—but mebbe we'd best do the courtin' when there ain't quite so many eyes an' years a-lookin' on, eh?"

If the Howler was not thoroughly in earnest, then he played his part to perfection. For a moment or two, it was a toss-up with the widow whether to laugh or to send a bit of lead through that rattle-brain. But her keen sense of the ridiculous gained the day, and her laugh rung out clear and mellow as the notes of a silver bell.

"Then it's a whack, honey?" eagerly muttered the Howler, moving a step nearer, his hands outstretched, only to stop abruptly, as the pistol again came to a level with his red nose, and the little woman flashed:

"It is a funeral if you don't take a walk, stranger! Must I say it once more? I allow no rowing in My House. Go outside, if you must kick up a fuss. And if you don't pick up your hoofs lively, you're going to get hurt—bad!"

This was talk such as Jonathan could understand without translation, and with a sheepish bow he shuffled backward until his body was clear of the door. It slammed sharply to in his face, and as a laugh ran through the spectators, the red-haired stranger wheeled about with business written in every feature.

He saw Colonel Joel Mallison standing near, one hand still caressing his distressed waist, while Frank Spartan was beside him grasping his free hand, apparently whispering rapidly in his ear.

Joe Duncan, sadly used up, was being led away by a few friends, and the little tough-looking lad of all-work attached to the hotel was about driving the stage away.

Hebrew had eyes for naught save the colonel, however, and striding forward he struck a position before that worthy, his hat cocked over one eye, his arms akimbo, his chin protruded pug-naciously.

"Ef I ain't a liar, you're the gent as give me a bunch an' whispered that I come o' four-legged stock! Now, I don't know your name—"

"Colonel Mallison—Howling Jonathan," and Frank Spartan stepped to one side with a low bow and graceful wave of his gloved hands, smiling as blandly as one might who feels confident he is making two very dear friends supremely happy.

The colonel bowed stiffly, but the Howler leaped into the air with a shrill howl that filled all Good Leather with its outlandish echoes, cracking his heels together, tearing off his battered hat and dashing it violently to the ground, standing upon it as a smile came near stretching his mouth from ear to ear.

"Run up ag'in' him the fust clatter! Who says I ain't a lucky cuss! Hough-ough-ugh-hoof!" and once more he split the air with his unearthly war-cry, his fist see-sawing, his feet going through the motions of climbing very high and very steep stairs.

"Chief o' Good Leather, that's what they call him! Chief o' the liveliest little camp that sets on the foot-stool, so they swore! An' that's the sort o' mutton I'm huntin' fer, you bet! It ain't no five-cent rest'ryant whar I take my meals at—not much! I'm a chief my own self, an' the worry best ain't half good enough fer me! Pork an' beans an' b'iled cabbage, with a bite or two o' fresh souse is what hits me right whar I live when I'm to home! Kunnel, wake up an' lis'en to Howling Jonathan Hebrew's lament!"

"You was chief o' Good Leather afore I come to town, but you can't stay chief unless you kin git away with my copperossity, clean! Name your tools, from a cyclone to a 'skeeter's probe! Step your distance, from a single ha'r's breadth to a thousan' mile! It's all one to your master—which is me! Bullet, steel or plain meat an' bones! Anythin' an' everythin', jest so we git down to solid fun while the sign's right! I don't ax much, but what I do ax, I ax mighty hard, honey!"

Clearly it was one of the colonel's unlucky days! He had no stomach for hard knocks, and a far less acute mind than his could easily have told that hard knocks and plenty of them were wrapped up in the hide of this wild beast in human shape. The citizens were looking on with undisguised interest, clearly expecting to see him punish this insolent braggart off-hand. The challenge was so blunt, so comprehensive, so sweeping in its terms, that he knew he must either fight or back squarely down before all that crowd.

His nerves were still unstrung from the sight of Herman Moskau, and the terrors which that sight had given birth to. He could not fight—much less such a fire-eater as this!

"Another time—I'm sick—I can't—"

He gasped out these disjointed words, then turned about and hurried through the crowd, almost running away!

The Howler seemed the most surprised of all that astonished assembly. Certainly he was the most disgusted.

He stared open-mouthed after the hastily retreating magnate, until Colonel Mallison dodged around the nearest corner, then his figure seemed to shrink and shrivel, his bristling hair to wilt and grow dim, his boisterous voice falling away to a husky whisper.

"Now I will be durned! An' that's the sort o' timber they makes chiefs out of in Good Leather? That's the kind o' tarrapin I've come all this way to onshell! Gimme my hat—I'm sick—I want to go home!"

There was an ugly muttering running through the crowd, many of whom, though quite as much surprised by the unaccountable action of the man to whom they had long looked up to as little less than perfect, were quick to resent any slur cast upon their town, and it is more than probable that Hebrew would have had his hunger and thirst for sport fully satisfied, only for the interference of Frank Spartan.

"Compose yourself, my friend," he said as he touched the champion lightly on the shoulder. "Rather than see you suffer so terribly, I will take the place of my friend, the colonel, who has been so suddenly taken sick. As I introduced you, I can hardly do less."

There was a momentary brightening up of the champion's face, but it as rapidly died away as he shook his head mournfully, saying faintly:

"I'm all broke up, stranger! I couldn't fight a sick kitten with it's han's tied an' it's toenails pulled out! Chief o'—good Lawd!"

A groan of utter misery broke from his lips, and Frank Spartan stepped hastily aside, evidently fearing an explosion of a disagreeable character. But though Howling Jonathan doubled up, his hands pressed to his middle, his face tightly screwed up, nothing worse followed.

"Ef I kin borry a wee drap o' red hicker, mebbe it'd cure me up ag'in," he groaned, casting a wistful glance around the grinning circle. "I'll give it back when I git done with it—the bottle I mean, durn ye!" he flashed as the crowd burst into a laugh.

Frank Spartan pressed a small flask into his eager hand, and then slipped away through the crowd while the red-haired champion was busy sampling its contents. A hearty drink, then Howling Jonathan tossed back his shaggy locks, once more himself.

"Durned ef I know, stranger, but what I will—whar is he?" suddenly breaking off as he failed to catch a glimpse of Spartan.

"Runnin' a foot-race with the kunnel!" cried one irreverent scoffer on the skirts of the crowd. "Ef somebody don't clap a muzzle onto you, you'll skeer every man-critter out o' Good Leather!"

"Nothin' chaine fer fun gone glimmerin' down the dark an' misty—oh, Moses!" snorted the Howler, burying both hands in his shaggy top, glaring about him with a half-angry, half-wretched air. "Nothin' chaine—be durned ef they ain't, though!" and once more his wild howl rang through Good Leather.

"Friends an' feller-citizens—fer I've come to Good Leather to stay ontel she git down on her two knees an' hails me chief an' high-cockolour! Feller-citizens, ef they ain't no fun in town, they's jest lots an' gobs of it layin' 'round

loose in the hills over back! I know, fer I took a taste as we was comin' through on time! I kin take my davy to that effec', fer didn't I lay out a dozen road-agents too cold to skin? Ax him!" and Jonathan pounced on one of the prospectors who had come in with the stage.

"It's so, more or less, boys," was the prompt response. "We was held up by Cap'n Clean-up, an' this gent fetched us through in 'way-up style. Not that it mattered much, only fer the fun—an' sech fun! ef my ha'r ain't snow-white, it orter be!"

"A pesky fool' trick, anyway!" growled the other prospector, with an angry scowl toward the Howler. "Cap'n Clean-up treated us clean white—didn't keep a red cent, an' tole us we might go on, when that crazy critter tuck a bee in his years an' run the hosses off. Turned the hull durned outfit end over end a thousan' times comin' down the Slide—he did, durn him!"

There seemed a healthy prospect for "fun," right then and there, but Jonathan was not easily turned from a course once entered upon, and with a lofty dignity he waved one hand for silence, the other stuck into his bosom, his chest swelling, his whole attitude that of an orator.

"Feller-citizens! Shell Good Leather be run over rough-shod by a passel o' critters so durned ugly they don't dast show tha'r faces fer fear they'd skeer each other into conniption fits! Shell Good Leather set down on her hunkers an' let this p'izen road-agent take all the cream, leavin' us nothin' but skim milk, an' sour at that? Shell she? Echo say not a durned once!"

"It was all well enough afore I come to town. It takes gen'us to lead a crowd or a army. Ef you never seen gen'us afore, gaze on it now, as done up in the mantle of Howlin' John, the Terror right from Headwaters!"

"A-men!" came in a drawling tone from the outer edge of the crowd, and a general laugh followed.

The Howler frowned portentously, but persisted:

"A man is the properest way to pronuncify it, pard, though your mistake ain't as big as a haystack. Foller me after them durned road-agents, an' when we git at 'em, you'll think I'm numerous enough to be counted a dozen times over, 'stead of a man! We kin clean 'em out too easy! I kin sw'ar to killin' a couple, an' I keeled over the boss of the gang so purty, he won't hev much fight left in him by the time we git thar, nuther!"

"And what'll come of Good Leather ef we do clean 'em out? What's a camp that can't sport it's own gang o' road-agents?" demanded "the fool of the camp," who had so often put in before.

It was a shrewd remark for a "fool" to make, and the general laugh which followed proved this. Howling Jonathan saw that he was wasting his breath, and that he had still one more lost chance to lament over. But repeated disappointments were teaching him how to bear adversity, and after one blank gaze around over the unsympathetic crowd, he added:

"Tain't fer me to crowd your likin', gents, an' ef you don't want to kiver yourselves all over with glory, let it slide. Anyhow, ef I can't lick a chief or eat a road-agent gang, I kin git drunk! An' them what would like to help me turn into a b'iled owl, kin foller the same sweet scent that tells my nose this is the way to find a p'izen-depot!"

The Howler hastened into the bar of My House, and with a long string of followers, ready enough to drink at his expense, though they did not seem to hanker too strongly after him as a leader on more dangerous business, he brought up against the polished bar, nodding cordially at the white-aproned attendant beyond it.

"Sling out the best you've got in the shop, Johnny, an' don't be lashful 'bout joinin' us your own sweet self. It's a chief from 'way up the headwaters that shouts!"

"The slate's broken, pard," softly uttered the larkeeper, with a gentle nod toward that popular and significant work of art, hanging in a prominent place above the glassware.

Jonathan stared at the emblem of no trust, then a hot flush came into his face, a red glow in his blue eyes.

"Did I break it, durn ye? Want to skin a stranger the fust time he sticks his nose in your shebang? Want to collect a national tank fer that cracked bit o'—Landlord!" with a howl that was almost enough to lift the roof of the house. "Be durned ef you kin skin—Landlord! I don't often kick, but—Landlord!"

The very picture of choking indignation, the man from headwaters danced from one foot to the other, his tightly clinched fists sawing the air. He shot a fragment of a sentence at the astonished and disgusted larkeeper, only to have his rage choke him off into a wild howl for the head of the house. And the last call was so lung-splitting that it distended his mouth so wide his eyes had to shut up.

Thus it was that he failed to see the trim figure of widow Watkins as she came sailing into the room, her brown eyes glowing, her red lips compressed, "business" written in every line of her fair face. And it was only when her plump little hand struck him sharply on the lips that

Jonathan opened his eyes. Opened them with a snarling curse, only to cut it short with a grunt of surprise as he stared at the fair widow.

"Be durned ef it ain't the same purty angel come back—"

"To give you warning for the last time that I will not permit any such disturbance in this place, sir," was the sharp interjection.

"You hear that, don't ye?" and Jonathan turned with a reproachful frown toward the barkeeper. "Kick up 'nother row will ye?"

"You made the row, not me. I appeal to the crowd—"

"Look at that, now!" and the Howler appeared the perfect personification of injured innocence. "Didn't you tell me I bu'sted your durned old slate, when I hedn't got fairly inside? Didn't you want me to pay fer it or go to the jug? An' didn't I call on the landlord fer per-teckshun from sech a hungry bloodsucker? Be course I did; an' so, ma'am, ef you'll only call him up to—"

"Call nothing!" curtly interjected the widow, motioning the eager citizens to keep their distance. "I understand your case well enough to manage without calling for assistance. You are a fraud and a traveling sign, but you can't beat your drink here."

Jonathan gave the fair virago one long, mournful gaze, then without a word he dove down in his pocket and brought up a fistful of mingled gold coin and bank-notes.

The widow cast a swift glance into his reproachful face, then turned to the barkeeper with a sharp glitter in her eyes. There was no need for her to utter the question, and he quickly answered:

"As a perfect stranger, calling for drinks for the whole crowd, ma'am, I simply asked him to look at the chrono over the bar. If that was wrong, I ask his and your pardon for my mistake."

The widow turned to Jonathan with a slight smile on her fair face, for business was business, and the sight of that money had changed her opinion of this loud-voiced stranger. He might be a nuisance, but he was not a bummer by trade.

"It was a mistake, my dear sir, which will sometimes happen in the best of companies. You were both mistaken, and so—shall we call it even and begin over again?"

"An' he didn't mean fer to 'cuse me o' bu'stin' up the furniture, then?" slowly muttered He-brew.

The widow laughed merrily.

"He was following a rule of mine, ever since I took to keeping hotel, to give trust to no one, without regard to their appearance or whether they were old friends or new acquaintances. Otherwise, you see, I might easily lose enough in bad debts to eat up all my profits."

"Your profits—your rules!" echoed Jonathan, a sudden light leaping into his blue eyes as they first cast a quick glance around the neatly-furnished bar and then came back to dwell on the trim, neat figure and pretty face of the widow. "Then you ain't—eh?"

"I am the landlady, sir," with a mocking little courtesy.

"And the boss—the land-lord?" persisted the Howler.

"I own no other boss than my own sweet will," laughed widow Watkins, far more communicative than was her wont.

Somehow this rough diamond interested her, despite the luckless fashion in which he had thus far been introduced to her notice. And then, some women are born coquettes, who would rather fascinate a satyr than to go through the world without making other captive. And widow Watkins would have been less than woman had she failed to read aright that glow of admiration.

"An' this is your bar? You own the hull shebang? Hotel, too?"

"All mine, and something more, if you must know, sir," she laughed.

"No old man to— Never married, I don't reckon?"

"A widow, sir," and she cast her brown eyes down bashfully, twisting the corner of her white apron between her plump fingers, a demure smile just curling the corners of her red lips.

It was an amusing farce, after all!

But the Howler seemed determined to make it more than a farce, if his earnestness could be measured by the force with which he dropped on his knees at her feet, catching her hand and pressing it first to his lips and then over his manly bosom, saying:

"If Good Leather ain't man enough fer to do what it orter, ma'am, let me take its place! Let me turn you from a widder into a wife, an' I'll do it so quick it'll make your head swim in a circle wuss than a circus ring!"

"Sir! what am I to understand by this conduct?" demanded the widow, fairly startled despite her coquetry, drawing back her hand with a gesture that bade fair to return it with interest—alongside the audacious fellow's pate!

"Business, ma'am, business clean up to the ban'le!" was the prompt reply. "I want a wife an' you want a husband, to look after thin' an' see you ain't cheated out o' your eye-teeth! Ef I do say so myself, I'm as good as they turn

out o' the 'factory these days. I'm sound as a dollar in wind, limb an' body. I kin lick any galoot as dared look crossways at my wife. I kin love yer harder then a blind mule kin kick frozen pumpkins down-hill. I kin tend bar—I jest love to tend bar, honey!" and carried away by the notion, intoxicated by the mere shadow of the future which seemed to open before him, Howling Jonathan smacked his lips and glanced wistfully toward the bar.

"Where you would be your own best customer!"

"Deed no, honey!" was his hasty assurance. "I'll sign a pledge to never git drunk but once a day, unless you say I kin do better fer bein' a good—"

The widow recovered from her brief dismay at the ridiculous scene her coquetry had precipitated, and as though resolved to at once end it, her face grew hard and her voice sharp:

"Enough of this folly! Get up, and beware how you ever offend in like manner again! If I am only a woman, I can handle the weapons of a man, and know how to rebuke all such idiots as you are showing yourself!"

"An' you won't— Durned ef I don't begin to think I've got the dirty shake!" spluttered Jonathan, his face flushing hotly, his eyes protruding wildly as widow Watkins turned and flounced away.

Slowly the red-haired stranger arose to his feet, wincing a little as the door closed behind the widow with an emphatic slam. He gave one mighty sigh as he glanced around over the grinning faces, then said:

"Waal, ef I can't git married, I kin git drunk enough to look twenty-seven different ways at the same time! Sling 'em out, Johnny! I'm thinkin' wimmen ain't no good, no-how!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A WOMAN'S REASON.

COLONEL JOEL MALLISON sat in his room at My House that same evening, the little round table at his elbow supplied with liquor, glasses and a box of cigars. It was easy to be seen, too, that he had not stinted himself in the matter of drink, though it was very seldom indeed that the chief of Good Leather permitted himself to "surround" enough "poison" for it to be recognized through his face, voice or walk.

Just now he was staring moodily at vacancy, his shaggy brows drawn together, his bull-dog jaws squared, his thick under lip thrust out as though he was trying how ugly he could make his never handsome face.

His large hands were tightly clinched one moment, then opening, to shut again, like one who longs to practice on the throat of a bitterly hated enemy.

Dark and ugly thoughts were floating across his mind, and those in Good Leather who thought they knew him best, would have stared aghast at Joel Mallison if they could have read those thoughts aright.

"Curse the day, anyhow!" he growled, as he filled a glass of brandy and tossed it down his anger-parched throat. "Everything has gone wrong end to! Everything is turning against me! First, that name—"

The sound of his hoarse, strained voice seemed to startle him, for with a savage light in his small eyes, he half-rose from his seat and glared around the room, only sinking back when he saw that he was alone.

For once the magnate of Good Leather had spoken the simple, unadorned truth, which, it may be said, he rarely did, even to himself. That was a day he would not soon forget.

Until then he had felt secure, had felt assured that the dead past was dead beyond all possibility of resurrection. But now?

All unsuspecting, that name had struck him a blow that fairly drove the breath from his body, the wits from his usually cool and crafty brain. It had made him drop the mask before those who would, if they could, work him deepest injury. If they should suspect the truth! If they were to follow up the clue he had so insanely let drop!

And then—that wild, fiery-headed, gascopading stranger! If he had—had but sent a bullet through his brain on the instant. If he had—

"I would, only it came so soon after I saw him and heard him asking for Franz—devil grip both father and son!" he snarled, his strong teeth grating together until it seemed as though they must be split by the fierce pressure.

Again Joel Mallison started sharply, one hand grasping the hilt of an ugly looking knife that nestled beneath his vest, but as the sound that startled him came again, he gave a gasp of relief and hastily passed a hand over his red face.

It was as though the motion drew a mask over his features, and he looked much nearer his usual self a moment later, when a narrow section of paper wall swung open and widow Mercy Watkins stepped lightly into the chamber, closing the door behind her.

It fitted so closely, and the paper had been chosen so well to aid in the work, that no one not in the secret would have dreamed that a door was on that side of the room at all.

"Didn't you hear me give the signal?" a little sharply demanded the fair landlady, as she crossed the room and dropped a handkerchief

over the door-knob, first making sure the key was turned in the lock.

"I was thinking, and before I could fairly waken, you came in."

"Drinking, I should say!"

Clearly, the widow was out of sorts, or else she, like the colonel, was occasionally to be seen without an every-day mask on.

"Whose money pays for it?" growled the colonel, in a bear-like style, very different from the manner in which he spoke to and of the charming widow in public.

"Mine, as much as yours, you brute!" sharply retorted the woman, her eyes flashing, her bosom heaving as her breath came quick and short.

She, as well as the colonel, had made a particularly disagreeable discovery, and her temper was none the better for it, now.

Colonel Mallison saw this, and from past experience he took warning. He needed her aid sorely, and rough usage would not make her any the more easily handled. He flung out one hand with a deprecatory gesture, forcing a smile and short laugh as he said:

"Of course, for what's mine is yours, little woman. If I snapped you up short, forget it, or lay the blame on what has happened to-day."

"If I knew what had happened, it might be done, but as long as you keep me in the dark, why—"

"That's all right, my girl," and the colonel reached out and by an arm about her trim waist, drew her to a seat on his knee. "It's not for you and me to quarrel, this late in the day. Our interests are so tied up in each other, that if bad luck drops on one, the other will be just as bad hurt."

There followed a little by-play that would have made Good Leather open wide its many eyes if those tight walls had suddenly been rendered transparent. Colonel Mallison had an end to reach, and he knew the shortest road to his goal. He knew how to play the lover, if he was old and fleshy and rather rough in his caresses.

The landlady of My House did not appear greatly displeased, though, had he been cooler, Joel Mallison might have seen that she suffered, rather than reciprocated. She, too, felt that she wanted some information he could give, and banished her tart humor with a good grace.

"If those poor fools outside could only see us now, Joel!" she uttered, with a short, mocking laugh. "And—do you know—I had another offer to-day? Isn't it rich?"

The colonel laughed softly. It was an amusing farce they were playing on the citizens of Good Leather, and many a time they had enjoyed a hearty laugh together over their perfect success in hoodwinking even the most acute. Thanks to their caution while in public. To that cunningly-fitted door, leading by a concealed passage half-way around the house to the opposite side, there to end in another door to the full as cunningly concealed. And they two alone shared that secret as they did another, which would have startled the citizens of Good Leather fully as much.

"Let the poor fools covet—I alone possess, little woman," and the colonel punctuated his words with a kiss. "The time will come when you and I will open their eyes by showing our certificate of marriage. But when the bloods know they have been courting a married woman—well, Good Leather will be rather unhealthy for me!"

That was the secret. The widow was no widow but a wife!

It had been her proposition, suggested by a pretty thorough knowledge of human nature in general, and man in particular. She knew that while as the wife of Good Leather's magnate, she would be honored and respected and all that, as a widow, young and charming, in the market, her chances for coining money would be enhanced a hundred-fold.

And thus it came that while Colonel Mallison supplied the funds for building, furnishing and opening My House, the widow received all the credit. Of course the colonel must board at the house, and that their secret might be the easier kept, this private communication between their chambers was constructed.

The colonel was too deeply interested in other matters to waste much time in billing and cooing after he had restored his little woman to good humor, and as she slipped from his knee into a chair, he asked:

"Well, what have you found out?"

"Something—but whether it is what you want to know, of course I can't say," slowly responded the "widow" as we must continue to call her. "You've been keeping a secret from me, Joel!"

Mallison frowned a little at this sudden charge, retorting sharply:

"And you—have you never kept anything from me?"

The shaft struck home, as less keen eyes than his could have readily told from the swiftly changing color; and Mallison laughed shortly as he added in a hard tone:

"If I have held anything back, little woman, it was only facts that couldn't interest you in the least—of something that took place before you and I came together."

"Concerning this blind man and his daughter?"

"That question can be answered better after you tell me just what discoveries you have made," with poorly assumed carelessness.

The widow was silent for a brief space, but then said:

"It was not a difficult task to get at the story of their past, and I was careful to keep track of all the main points. I had to, since you forgot to tell me just what it was you wanted to find out."

"Don't harp on that string, Mercy! Haven't I told you I'd let you in on the ground floor, presently?" he muttered, impatiently.

"I was afraid you would forget the fact," and the widow laughed a little maliciously. "But since your memory is so good, business!"

"Years ago, Herman Moskau, with his wife and two children, lived in the East, fairly well off, if not wealthy. He was a merchant, an importer of some sort, though I didn't pay much attention to that part of the story. He was music-crazy, I reckon, from what I learned."

Colonel Mallison made an impatient gesture. "Never mind going so far back, Mercy!"

"Just as you say; you know I am groping in the dark," with another malicious little nod and sparkle of the nut-brown eyes. "If you could just give me a hint as to which one of the family you want to—"

"Don't crowd me too hard, or you may regret it," slowly muttered the magnate of Good Leather, an ugly look in his small eyes. "You know well enough; about his son."

The widow nodded, her eyes aglow. She had gained her point, and like a true woman, was content for the present.

"Well, this son, named Franz Moskau, appears to have been an enterprising sort of youngster, and though his father had enough for all, he would strike out for himself, resolved to make a fortune by quicker means than dabbling in musty dry-goods or whatever it may have been the old gentleman handled. And so, with a snug sum in his pocket, and the blessings of father, mother and sister besides, he set out for the West, to look about him before piling up his fortune."

"It did not take him long to make up his mind. The country was mine-mad then, and he fell in with a smooth-tongued fellow called Morris Grant, who claimed to be an experienced miner, but just then down on his luck. He felt sure he would strike it rich, if he had a fair start in the race for wealth, and before he gave over, this Franz Moskau believed the same. At any rate, he staked the prospector, and they agreed to divide the profits, if any."

"According to the letters Franz wrote home, Morris Grant's head was level, and made good his promises of striking a good thing. They worked together, I believe, and one of them made a lucky hit. Franz had money enough left to develop the claim sufficiently to prove its worth, and then, I believe, there was some talk of selling out for a large sum; just what, I don't think the old man mentioned."

"That was the last letter they received from Franz. Time passed on, and misfortunes came upon them, thick and heavy. The mother died. The father lost his eyesight, which had been growing poor for years past. And then, by some means which I failed to fully understand, they lost all their property."

"In all this time they heard nothing from the son, though they wrote often, begging him to come home, let the sacrifice be what it might. As he did not come, and as they heard nothing from him, they began to fear he was dead, or that some great misfortune had befallen him."

"To settle their doubts, the father and daughter sold off what few articles remained to them, from the financial wreck, and set out in search of the missing son. They knew the name of the place near which his mine was located, and had little difficulty in finding it. That was New Rush, and the mine was called The Plenty."

Widow Watkins paused as she uttered these names, gazing keenly into the face of her husband, seeking to read there the truth or falsity of the suspicions which his strange conduct at sight of Herman Moskau had awakened in her mind. She saw a dark and scowling countenance, with redly-glowing eyes and hard-set jaws; but the colonel made no sign, spoke no word, and she resumed:

"This much they found without difficulty, but it was about all, at least so far as their principal hope was concerned. The mine was being worked for all it was worth, and the present owners bade fair to make their independent fortunes out of it. But neither Franz Moskau nor Morris Grant were of those owners."

"The old man told his story, and the mine-owners proved their title clear, even to the blind man's satisfaction. They showed their papers, and they were in perfect shape. One set showed that Franz Moskau had transferred his share in the Plenty Mine to Morris Grant, for full value received. The others showed that Morris Grant had in turn sold the mine to the present owners, for a large sum; \$75,000 I think. As for the rest, no one seemed able to tell them where either Franz or Morris had gone; they might as well have dropped into the bowels of the earth."

"Then began the weary search which has lasted until this day, and wholly without success. The old man fondly believed that at last his fiddle would bring back the missing son, that through the old love for music, which, it seems, was quite as strong in Franz as in his father, they would once more be united."

"Not this side the grave—curse them!" savagely grated Mallison, a hard, merciless laugh following, cut short by the low cry and exultant laugh from the lips of the widow.

"I knew it! I felt it all the time! You are Morris Grant!" she cried; her brown eyes all aglow. "You put the missing man out of the way—that sounds so much better than to say you killed him!"

Colonel Joel Mattison started to his feet, his hands clinched until the nails were stained with blood. His face was distorted until he looked fairly demoniac. His voice was harsh and strained, though habitual prudence kept it at a low pitch.

"You lie! Say that again, and I'll—"

His fist was drawn back and he seemed on the point of dashing it into the widow's face. It seemed as though he would murder her in his savage rage, but she never flinched, never lifted a hand to ward off the blow or to sign for mercy. She looked him full in the face, laughing in a low, mellow tone, utterly fearless. It was a superb exhibition of nerve, and it carried the day.

The clinched fist slowly lowered, and Joel Mallison sunk back into his chair, his florid face turning a sickly yellow as he muttered:

"Don't crowd me too far, Mercy! I don't want to hurt you, but—"

"All the same, you are Morris Grant!" was the positive interjection, a sudden scorn leaping into the fair face and blazing in the nut-brown eyes. "Bah! have you known me this long, Joel Mallison, yet think to blind me to so plain a truth? Once more, I say you are Morris Grant, one time partner of Franz Moskau, for whom these people are hunting. Not that it matters to me the value of a crooked pin, but I'm tired of being treated as a spy, or some foolish child whose lips cannot keep a secret."

The colonel sat glaring at her from under cover of his shaggy brows as he crouched with his elbows supported on his knees. Twice he seemed about to break the silence, and twice he closed his lips again without saying a word.

"You should know me well enough by this time, Joel—to have no fears of my betraying you—supposing there is anything in particular to betray," slowly added the widow. "I am as much an angel as you are saint—no more. I have kept some pretty off-colored secrets in my time and if I fail a friend now, it will be the first. Once more, I say you are the man who called himself Morris Grant, whether that was your rightful name or not."

"Suppose I was—what of it?" growled the colonel, savagely. "You said everything was square about the mine and its sale!"

"Of course it was," and the widow laughed lightly, more like her usual self now her point was gained. "I know you about as well as you know yourself, and I never once set you down a fool."

"What are you driving at, then?" he snapped, sourly.

"Kicking for my rights—the rights of your wife, love!" laughed the widow, her eyes sparkling with true womanly malice. "And because I wanted to give you a solemn warning for your own good."

"I'm not in the humor for nonsense, just now."

"It will be sorry jesting for you if ever the truth gets out, my dear! True, you are the chief of Good Leather, and until now your lightest word has been as law to these poor fools! True, these two strangers who hunt for Morris Grant only less earnestly than they search for Franz Moskau, are poor and helpless in themselves; but he is blind, she is young and lovely and innocent. Let them raise their voices against Colonel Joel Mallison—let them prove that he is Morris Grant—let them charge you with removing their brother and son, and if there is the slightest joint in your armor, be sure a necktie-party will come off in Good Leather, with you as the principal performer!"

"That's just what I'm afraid of," muttered Mallison, starting up as a mocking laugh broke from those scarlet lips.

"If you are not Morris Grant, what have you to fear?" she asked, catching quickly at his slip of the tongue.

"Haven't I owned that I did once pass as Morris Grant?" sourly.

"Not in so many words, my precious!"

"Well, if you will have it—I was Morris Grant!"

"Now, that's white and decent, just as it should be, dear," said the widow, stepping to his side and resting one hand on his bowed head. "If I can't be trusted with all, I'll be trusted with nothing. The day you plainly show you doubt me, Joel, will be the day of our last parting."

"I do trust you, little woman," he said, but still in a surly tone of voice that brought the

bright light back to her eyes and sent her to her former place. "I admit that I played it sharp on young Moskau, but he brought it on himself. He would crowd me with temptation, the idiot! He made me gouge him, almost against my will!"

"Don't spoil a good thing, dear. I am a bird of prey, as well as you are, and it does me good to hear of a smart operation like this must have been!"

"It wasn't so bad," and Mallison laughed shortly. "They can't find a single flaw—they can't prove anything against Morris Grant, even if they ever find him. But—you know how easy it is to raise a mob among such hot-bloods. And you know how hard it is to choke them off when once they get started, too!"

"Don't I?" and a gray shade settled over the woman's face, making her look years older, and far from beautiful. "I've seen more than one in my time, and I hope to never take part in another. That is the reason why I determined to get at the bottom of this affair. I knew I could be of more use to you then; and if these people ever suspect that you are Morris Grant, be sure you will need all the aid you can get."

"They'll not trouble Good Leather long. When they fail to learn anything of the man they are hunting for, they will move on again. I know this, for I have kept track of them for the past year—ever since I first heard of them strolling through the country."

"Yet they took you by surprise to-day?"

"I lost track of them two months ago. Then they were facing to the south. I didn't look for them up this way."

"You know—they spoke of one who had proved himself a good friend," said the widow, her voice suddenly growing harder. "If you have kept track of them as closely as you say, you must have heard of his Quixotic notions!"

"You mean Frank Spartan?"

"Of course. You know he has just come to town?"

"I saw him to-day, yes."

"That girl told me he had promised to find her brother, if he was on the face of the earth, and when Frank Spartan makes a promise, it is no common difficulty that can turn him to one side. You know that!"

A short, hard laugh came from those thick lips.

"He'll have to look somewhere else besides on the face of the earth for Franz Moskau! But I don't fear his interference one-half as much as I do that of another—that infernal red-haired rascal!"

"Not Howlin' Jonathan?" and the widow looked the surprise she felt.

"Howling devil!" grated the colonel, savagely. "He was playing a part, I could almost take my oath! You know the word that came of a dangerous enemy, a detective or something of the kind, who—"

"This coarse brute can't be the one!" exclaimed the widow.

"I wish I was as sure of that; I'd sleep a good deal sounder this night!" grated the colonel, scowlingly.

There was a brief silence, broken by the widow.

"Well, one thing at a time. After all, if this fellow is the one you think, it is not our part to handle him, so let's settle about this other scrape. Do you know, I've got an idea?"

"Let's have it, then."

"Why not make assurance doubly sure? Why not take to yourself a safeguard that will protect you, and seal their lips, even if it should come out that you were the partner of Franz Moskau?"

"I don't understand you, little woman!" uttered the colonel, his small eyes opening wide, filling with a puzzled light. "Speak out!"

This did not seem so easy for the one addressed. It was a bold card to play, and she hardly relished the idea of facing it. The colonel had an ugly trick of bursting into a hot and dangerous rage at times, when he was hardly accountable for what he might do.

Yet, ever since she left Amelia Moskau, after drawing from the poor child her secret, widow Watkins had been weighing this very point, and when she entered the room of the Good Leather magnate, it was with the firm resolve to place the scheme before him in plain words.

"You know that Frank Spartan is a hard card to draw against. You can guess why he is so interested in this matter. She told me—she said that he loved her, and had begged her to marry him."

The words seemed to stick in her throat, and she kept her glowing eyes cast down, as though she feared their light might betray her real reason for making such a strange suggestion.

"Well? He isn't the first fool led away by a pretty face!"

"Morris Grant has more to fear from Frank Spartan than from both the others. If he is bluffed out of the game, there wouldn't be so much to fear. And it can only be done in one way—by your marrying this sister of Franz Moskau yourself!"

It was out now, and the widow looked up to laugh softly as she encountered the astonished, almost stupefied gaze of the colonel.

"Marry her! And you?" he managed to gasp at length.

"Never borrow trouble on my account," was the light retort. "What wouldn't I be willing to sacrifice for the good of as true a friend as you have proven to me? Even this—and if you are wise you will think twice before you throw the chance over your shoulder!"

"But how—you are crazy, girl!"

"There is method in my madness, then," with another merry laugh. "I am giving you the best and most disinterested advice you ever received in the whole course of your life. You are an old bachelor. Your pate is growing frosty—or would be, if you were not quite so sensitive on the score of white hairs! It is quite time you were settling down in life. Here is a charming young wife ready to your hand, and if you are not a much bigger fool than the world gives you credit for being, you will make all safe for Morris Grant by giving him a wife in the sister of his late—I am right!—partner, Franz Moskau!"

As she uttered these words, the widow rose from her chair and came to his side, hurriedly uttering:

"Think of what I say, Joel, and don't throw it over your shoulder through a silly scruple on my account. I have lived without you—I can do so again. For your good, remember!"

She touched his flushed brow with her hot lips, then turned and opening the secret door, vanished from view, leaving him utterly speechless with surprise and wonder.

Surely this was remarkable advice for a wife to give her husband.

CHAPTER IX.

"OH, WHERE IS MY BOY TO-NIGHT?"

THERE was another establishment in Good Leather which was built and run by the money of Colonel Joel Mallison, though very few had any knowledge of this fact, or even suspected that the colonel had aught to do with "The Mint" save dropping an occasional double-eagle on one or another card, merely "to help along business" when he was showing some recent arrival "the elephant."

Iceberg Dave Ingram was popularly supposed to be the sole proprietor of the gambling room and saloon attached, for it was while acting as manager of "The Mint" on the principle of "peace if I have to have war," that the white-faced sport was first introduced to the citizens of Good Leather. He took such an interest in the matter, and seemed so bent on setting a precedent that could be understood in only one way, that no one thought of asking if he had a partner in the enterprise, silent or otherwise.

That precedent was written in lurid letters, and it did not take long for the community at large to comprehend that order was the first law of The Mint, and that he who attempted to "kick up a ruction" within those four walls, must be prepared to "give and take" with Iceberg Dave. And almost as early they learned that the chances were three to one that those who made the venture would take considerably more than they gave. Hence it came to pass that The Mint was a model establishment, judged by the rules of the "wild and woolly West."

It was a paying enterprise, too, and hardly felt the lack of custom. Good Leather was flourishing. Her mines were being rapidly developed, fresh capital was constantly coming in for investment, wages were good and promptly paid. And men will gamble when they have a chance offered.

The little "breeze" occasioned by the advent of Howling Jonathan as a temporary substitute for the regular driver to the stage, with the peculiar events which followed, wrought no injury to The Mint, but just the contrary. Men will talk, and when that is so, there will be widely different views taken of the same subject. This was the case on the present occasion, and before darkness came over Good Leather, it was the general impression that "something" was bound to happen before another sun-rising.

Just what, when, where, how, was not so generally settled; but on one point the citizens were practically unanimous. The parties more immediately concerned were to be Colonel Joel Mallison and this red-haired nondescript from the beginning of navigation, Howling Jonathan. And there was something added about Frank Spartan, as well. And it was pretty well agreed upon that a fellow would be a natural born idiot if he even thought of going to sleep that night.

And so, earlier than usual, there was a goodly company gathered in the spacious interior of The Mint that evening. The dealers, though as yet Iceberg Dave had not put in an appearance, cut little time to waste before opening their banks and setting the ball to rolling. And Headlight Harry behind the bar quickly found the position far from being a sinecure.

Those who cared more for cards than they did for drink and idle gossip, that put no money in their pockets, trusted implicitly to the pledge of their friends that they would be called at the first sign of "business," but though that call

came not, yet they started to their feet with looks and exclamations of wondering interest.

Through the room floated a low, sweet, yet wailing sound, such as only one instrument can give utterance to, and then only under the tender, practiced hands of a master. From beyond the frail partition that separated the bar from the gambling-room proper, came this sound. And as the startled sports listened, that wail rose and floated off into one of the tunes of recent days, which has brought tears to many an eye and reopened many an old and almost mortal wound.

Then—a voice as perfect in its way as the music, low and even mournful, yet clear and penetrating; mellow and sweet, yet full of power repressed, took up the first verse, accompanied by the violin. And there was a sobbing, despairing wail in both as the refrain was repeated:

"Oh, where is my boy to-night?"

This was no ordinary camp music, nor these of the common run of saloon players and singers. It needed no cultured ear to decide that, and before the first verse was sung, the dealers found their tables deserted and their occupation gone, for the time being.

Roughs and toughs, gamblers and drunkards though there were in the crowd, a more orderly assemblage never listened to music or song. They gathered around, but all were silent, all were respectful, all were deeply interested—with possibly one exception.

True to his life-quest, Herman Moskau, with Amelia as his eyes, left My House soon after dark, and as the surest method of attracting attention and interest, he entered The Mint, and seating himself beside one of the little round tables in the saloon proper, uncovered his beloved violin, and, whispering to Amelia, drew bow across the strings.

She stood at his side, her face flushed with the modesty which all their weary wanderings in search of the missing boy had failed to destroy or even lessen, her hands nervously clasped before her, her blue eyes downcast and veiled by their long lashes. Tremblingly at first, but then strong and true, showing natural as well as trained pathos, her voice filled the saloon with its mournful melody. It seemed more than a song. It was a prayer, all condensed in the last line.

And as her voice died away, trembling, almost sobbing, the violin in the hands of its master repeated the question as plainly and even more yearningly. It was the perfection of art, for the musician felt all that he tried to express through that medium.

Amelia cast a quick glance around over the interested faces while the violin was playing its part, instinctively searching for some sign which might lead to the discovery of their lost relative. A low, half-glad, half-frightened ejaculation came to her lips as she recognized a familiar, loved countenance close at hand.

"What is it, 'Melie? Not—not our boy?" eagerly muttered the blind minstrel, in his pitiful hoping against hope making a sharp discord with his suddenly unnerved fingers.

"No, father. I was very foolish. I did but see the face of a good friend close by us," faintly whispered the maiden, bending her lips close to the old man's ear.

"It is not so many friends the poor and the blind have, that I can miss a guess very wide," smiled the old man, turning his thin face as though guided by some subtle instinct in the right direction. "It is the good Mister Frank—no, 'Melie?"

His handsome face flushed, Frank Spartan stepped forward and took the proffered hand, pressing it warmly, stooping low and hurriedly muttering some words, to which the blind man shook his white head in dissent, a pathetic tremor in his voice as he replied:

"It is very kind that you wish to take the trouble, my good sir, but it is better we cling by the old hope—yes! It is in my heart that I feel the dear moose will fetch us by our boy the most quick! It is much kind by the way you look at it, but not mine—no! And, if it was true—if I had to think so mine self—it would break away down my little courage, sure! It is my hope; it is all that keeps my poor, sick heart from dying out; it keeps me from crazy going!"

Eagerly the crowd listened, but not one spoke or made a stir sufficient to break the spell which seemed to have fallen over them with the first strain of music, the first sound of that sweet young voice.

And they seemed to fairly hold their breath, those strong, rough, and in more cases than one, those crime-hardened men, as the violin once more awoke under the hand of the blind master, and that pure voice took up the second verse.

Frank Spartan silently stepped back a pace, his hat in hand, his face grave and hard-set as his black eyes roved swiftly from face to face, as though looking for some sign of scorn or scoffing.

It was a difficult position for any man to fill, and particularly hard for one like him. He was known so widely as a gambler and a sport, to

nearly every man in that region. They knew that in the days gone by he had been a skeptic on the question of female morality.

He had hardly known his own mother, and would have been better off had he known even less. He had no sister, no relative living, and until he met this fair-faced girl, he had looked upon her sex as fit prey for men to capture and then cast aside as worse than useless. He knew that many of those now present must have heard him rail and scoff against the sex, and he could not help feeling that they would be very slow to give him credit for honest motives in his conduct now. So knowing, it is not strange that he should search for such sign.

The song was completed, and the blind man dropped his instrument with that old, pitiful look of blended hope and fear on his face. As he truly said, he had placed all his hopes on the love of music eventually bringing about the meeting with his lost son. Just how it was to be, he could not tell himself, but that was his hope and faith.

"'Melie?" he muttered, plucking her sleeve with his trembling fingers. "'Melie, it is time to ask the good people—no?"

A strong hand touched his shoulder, and Frank Spartan said:

"Allow me, instead, Mr. Moskau."

He did not wait for permission, but moved to the front, facing the curious gathering, his face white and his eyes glowing vividly.

"Gentlemen, please give me your attention for a few moments. I ask it as a personal favor, as well as in the interests of humanity."

"Let her roll, pard," promptly uttered a neatly dressed man of near middle age, but about whose every look and air clung the atmosphere of the gaming-tables. "But if your speech falls flat, blame not your own eloquence, but give credit to the celestial strains which are still lingering in our ears!"

The pale face flushed a little and the black eyes flashed with an almost menacing light, but Frank Spartan held his feelings under control with a will of iron, and his voice showed nothing of resentment as he added:

"This is no ordinary case, gentlemen, and I beg you will listen as soberly and as earnestly as I am speaking to you. You see these good people. They are my friends, and a favor shown to them is a double favor shown to me. And—though I sincerely trust this addition is wholly unnecessary, though I prefer making it at this point—any wrong done them, any slur cast out, any insult offered to either father or daughter, will be resented by me at the point of the knife!"

"More interesting than I had any idea of," bowed Perry Blair, the gambler who had spoken before.

"I'm dealing, if you please, sir!" sharply uttered Spartan, a dangerous light filling his jetty eyes.

Blair bowed again with mock humility. There was a little stir and a growing hum among the crowd. They knew that there was little love lost between the two professional sports, and began to scent music in the air from that quarter.

Herman Moskau was listening eagerly, his sightless eyes turning from one to the other as the two men spoke, but his pathetic eagerness could no longer wait, and his trembling voice broke in:

"It is not begging for money that we do this, my good friends, for there is yet a little dollars by our pockets, to carry us on some more miles, if it is not here the kind Lord our hearts will happy make! It is by hopes to find our poor boy—my son Franz, gentlemen!"

His voice choked and Amelia bent over him tenderly, unconsciously forming a picture that softened more hearts than one in that assembly.

"They are looking for a son who disappeared from New Rush, several years ago, gentlemen," added Frank Spartan. "He was the discoverer of the mine Plenty. He had a partner named Morris Grant, who is believed to have played a villainous part in the sale of that mine. For both Franz Moskau and Morris Grant vanished, and all search for either has been in vain, from that day to this."

"The present owners of The Plenty, can show apparently clean title to the property. According to their papers, Franz Moskau transferred all his rights in the mine to his partner, and Morris Grant sold the claim for \$75,000. So far, everything appears open and aboveboard. But what has become of Franz Moskau? Why did he not answer the letters which came to him from home, telling of illness and death? Why has he never been heard from in any way?"

"He was a good boy, gentlemen," muttered the blind minstrel. "He was kind and full-hearted. He would never be still so long, if it was well by him—no! He would come back by his people, if some bad man nefer keep him back away—that I know so sure as I know there is a merciful Lord in the heavens yonder up!"

"Double sorrow and trouble came upon this poor gentleman," added Frank Spartan, his own voice growing unsteady. "His wife died. He lost his eyesight. His property was taken from him, and he was turned out from his home

to live or die as heaven pleased. Yet through it all his great love for his son prevailed. It has given him strength to come this far in search of him. It has given him strength to travel thousands of miles, living only by kind charity, borne up only by the hope of one day finding his lost son, or, at least, gaining positive knowledge of his—"

"No, no!" tremblingly cried the blind man, tears in his sightless eyes, his trembling hands outstretched, his wan face painfully working. "It is not that—it is alive he is, my poor boy! If he was not still alive, would I be so? No—I would die too! It would kill my sick heart so quick! The goot Got would not so cruel be as that—no!"

"Take it to yourselves, gentlemen," said Spartan, his voice low and far from steady. "Try and put yourself in his place. And if you can aid him in any manner, I am sure you will do so. And now—can any one of you give any information regarding either Franz Moskau or Morris Grant?"

"Listen, 'Melie! Lose not a word, now!" gasped the blind man.

But it was listening in vain, for not a word broke the silence. No one present appeared to have any information to give. And even Herman Moskau could not hope longer. A long, heart-sick sigh parted his lips, and his white head bowed on the table beside which he sat.

Frank Spartan impulsively dropped his silk hat on the table close by that white head, and dropping into it a handful of gold, he cried:

"Gentlemen, not as mendicants, but in the name of humanity I appeal to you one and all! I have given you the pitiful story of this poor man. You know how helpless he is. You can see that but one hope in life remains with him—the hope that by searching the country through, he may chance upon some news of his lost son. But to do that, he must have some money, and—"

"Not so much, goot people," brokenly uttered Herman Moskau, lifting his tear-wet face, with a deprecatory wave of his thin hand. "Only the small bit you may think the moosic is worth by you. It is not beggar we want to be—my child and me—no!"

"Ef I was to give all that hes bin wuth to me, even this fur, be durned ef I'd hev enough dust left to git drunk on!" impulsively cried one rough day-laborer, as he moved forward and dropped some coin into the hat.

That was "a starter," and quickly the crowd moved around, each man giving according to his means or his nature. And not one but what had a kindly word to say, until Perry Blair passed up, dropping a heavy contribution into the hat, then laughing in the face of Spartan as he said, with a meaning nod toward the blushing, down-cast face of the girl:

"It's a rich snap, old fellow, and I envy you more on her—"

He never finished the sneering insult, for swift as thought and sure as death the fist of Frank Spartan shot out, striking the gambler full between the eyes with a force that sent him headlong clear of the floor until his head struck first, close up against the bar!

There was an immediate scattering of the crowd, leaving a lane clear between the two men. White as a corpse, his eyes glowing redly, his face for the moment looking more like a demon than aught human, Frank Spartan stood with revolver drawn, glaring at his fallen foe.

Then, as he saw no effort on his part to arise, his glowing eyes shot around the circle of startled faces, his voice hard and vicious:

"Take that cur away, or I'll stamp the very semblance of humanity out of his carcass! Take him away, ye who call him friend! Get him out of my sight, or worse will follow!"

"Father, let us run away! It is bad here!" gasped Amelia, scared almost out of her senses by the unfortunate affair.

She tugged at his arm, half-crying, but the poor old man was bewildered by the sudden outbreak, and sat motionless, staring around with his sightless eyes. His already overtasked brain was not equal to the emergency, and forgetful of the answer already received, he muttered:

"Not yet, 'Melie—it is a chance we must not lose—no! It is nefe a chance we can let go by, if we hope to find our poor boy."

He shook off her trembling grasp and rose to his feet, steadying himself against the table with one hand, the other clinging to his beloved instrument. He spoke, his voice full of pitiful hope and longing:

"My goot friends, I thank you much for listen so quiet to the moosic my violin maken. And now, if you will be so kind, it is a poor old blind man who is looking this long time for a goot son that stop away from his home such a sad, weary time! It is my boy Franz—a fine little lad, gentlemen! No—I am foolish growin', gentlemen! That was long time ago, when his mother was living yet—when we all happy was together! So long ago, that now my boy Franz was more tall grown as his father—mel! A fine, tall, strong, soldier-looking man, my friends. With hair and eyes like those you see—'Melie, child, let the kind people see! So—but hair more bright and eyes more blue and sweet as these, gentlemen! That was my boy Franz!"

Maybe you know where he is now? Maybe you can bring us by him—yes?"

It is impossible to give even a shadow of the pathos contained in this trembling speech. It was not the words so much as the tones, the constantly changing expression, now full of hope, now shrinking from the answer which he implored yet feared to receive. And not a little was owing to the sightless eyes, from which the tears were unconsciously flowing. To the shrinking, trembling figure of the fair young maiden.

It was sufficient to quell any outbreak which might easily have followed that promptly avenged insult, for Perry Blair was a popular sport in Good Leather, and had a number of friends and adherents present. It was enough to still even the fierce rage which until then almost turned Frank Spartan into a demon.

He turned and gently touched the old man's arm.

"The glad time is not for to-night, father," he said, gently.

The blind man passed one thin hand across his brow, sighing softly as he sunk back into his chair, mechanically fingering the strings of his instrument as he spoke again:

"The goot Got he knows what is pest, and it is not Franz's father who will say no! I thank you, kind people, for listen so goot to the blind man. And now—'Melie?"

"Yes, father."

"We will play for the kind people. You will sing for them."

Amelia, not daring to refuse, cast an appealing glance toward Frank Spartan. At first he did not catch her glance, for he was coldly watching the removal of the still insensible gambler who had felt the full power of his good right arm.

"When he comes to, tell him that I am waiting for him, if he wants to get even," he hurriedly muttered as the men passed by.

"No need to tell him that!" was the hard retort, with a vicious snapping in the fellow's eyes. "He'll take it for granted."

"I'll not disappoint him," was the cool return.

A wailing chord caused him to turn toward the musician, and his white brow wrinkled a little as he saw Herman Moskau nodding toward Amelia, whose tearful, appealing glance spoke volumes to him.

"Is it not time to return to the hotel?" he whispered, quickly. "You are not strong, and Amelia is not able to sing any more."

"I am strong enough ever, when it is to pay a debt, my dear friend," returned the blind man, with a dignity that was almost pitiful. "It is only my moosic I can pay these kind people for their gold that is to take us by our lost boy! It is not all beggar we are—no!"

There was something in the strong, sharp motion he gave his bow that told Frank Spartan the blind man was hurt if not angry with him for this effort to draw him away, and he stood aside, grave and quiet, feeling that his proximity would lend Amelia a little of the strength she so sadly needed just then.

As though to remove his own sadness at this last disappointment, the blind minstrel played a tune in striking contrast with the one which had introduced him to the *habitués* of Good Leather, quick and rollicking, sending a thrill to the heels of many a man present, and apparently extending its thrill far beyond those four walls. For, with a wild howl and a wilder whoop, a red-haired man leaped into the room, his blue eyes glaring around as though in search of the dancing.

The Terror from Headwaters had arrived!

The wild outburst startled the blind musician, and angry looks were turned upon the luckless intruder who was cutting their amusement short, but the Howler paid no attention to them. He seemed to take in the situation at a glance, and swaggered up to the table on which the well freighted hat still stood, dropping into it a gold piece with a flourish as he cried out heartily:

"Money makes the mar' trot, an' I reckon it'll liven up your elbow j'int a wee bit, too, daddy! Go on with the music! Give us a slam-up chune, full o' spice an' kivered over with kyann! I'm Howlin' Jonathan, a Holy Terror right from Headwaters, an' my boots is ram-jammed chuck full o' quicksilver to-night! Whooray for whooreel!"

Frank Spartan had moved between Herman Moskau and this red-headed whirlwind, his hands tightly clinched and his eyes glowing dangerously, but apparently Howling Jonathan saw neither him nor his warlike actions.

He spun around on one boot-heel like a whirling dervish, almost laying himself flat on his back, but deftly recovering himself and drawing his athletic figure proudly erect as he crossed his arms over his chest and glared stern defiance at each grinning face.

"The critter as says I'm drunk, slaps my mother-in-law right on the gob, an' he kin do it over ag'in ef he— Good Lawd!"

Meekly the blind minstrel was complying, striking into a fresh tune, even more "quick and devilish" than the other. It seemed to strike Jonathan as with a galvanic shock, sending every member of his body going in wild

tune to the music, his eyes closing, his tongue sticking out, his red face fairly glowing with ecstasy!

"Good—Lawd!" he gasped, in explosive snorts. "Ef this ain't heaven, then I don't never want to git thar! Talk 'bout the heavenly quire o' musical angels! They cain't tetch the old man with a forty-rod pole! He's music b'iled down an' concentrated ontel ef you was to squeeze the thousandth part of a cunce more into his hide, he'd bu'st wide open an' float off to glory whar he must b'long by rights!"

Not loud enough to disturb the sweet yet intoxicating sounds, nor to awaken the wrath of the spell-bound crowd, did Howling Jonathan thus deliver himself. He seemed lost to all else, to hear nothing but those thrilling strains—see he certainly could not, for his eyes were closed as tight as facial muscles could seal them!

But then he gave a subdued howl that startled the crowd as though a bomb had suddenly burst in their midst, and leaping over to where a tall, gaunt, dyspeptic-looking man was standing, he caught him about the middle and whirled him into the center of the floor with:

"Sech a clean waste o' harmony an' jig-juice is a sin an' a shame to human men! Dance, you critter! Dance ontel your toenails drap off with pure joy! Dance, you onregenerated galoots! That's right," as a few others caught the grim jest and acted upon it. "Glory to the ram! Honor your pardners heap-big! Hug! Back an' fo'th! Do-see-do! Hug some mo'! Ladies change!" flinging the thin man headlong into the dancing mass and grabbing another luckless individual. "Hug! Squeeze han's! Slamanade all—to the bar! Treat your pardners— Good Lawd!"

CHAPTER X.

THE PRICE OF A SECRET.

FRANK SPARTAN watched the scene, gravely, even gloomily. Now, as so many times before, he was asking himself how it was all to end.

Considering the life he had led ever since he could remember, and the hard, bitter lessons he had learned in his brief lifetime, it is not greatly to be wondered at that he should find it hard and wearing work to so completely change his course, as he had ever since the day when he first crossed the path of this fair-faced girl.

Until then he had felt many a hot passion, but never once a feeling that deserved to be called love. He had admired women almost without number, and exerted his powers to the utmost in order to win them, but ever before, when the victory was won, the fruit began to lose its flavor and attractiveness. Always, until now.

It was a startling revelation to himself, when he sat down one day and studied out the truth of the strange influence which this child of a blind beggar had over him, mind and body. It seemed to him, like all of his class, tinged with superstition, something akin to witchcraft; and for weeks, and even months, Frank Spartan fought against it and against himself. Only to realize at last what that strangely-powerful, strangely-sweet witchcraft really consisted of.

It was this struggle for the truth, this fight against his evil nature, this transposing all he had ever preached and practiced, that so wore the gambler down, making his nerves tense as piano wires, and almost as easily to be played upon. Outwardly he gave little evidence of the radical change, but it was there. He knew it, and it seemed to him that it must be printed on his face in letters large and plain enough for the dullest-witted to read aright.

He knew that he could not follow, much less accompany, the blind man in his wearisome search for the missing Franz Moskau, without that fact attracting notice and drawing forth comment. For himself, he believed, it mattered little; but when he thought of poor Amelia, his hardest trials began afresh. He was known so widely, his opinions had been so recklessly sown at large. There could be but one interpretation.

He was ever on the alert to catch a sneer, a smile, a word that could sting the maiden whom he loved so entirely. And though there were few men in all the land who valued life at a lower figure than Frank Spartan, who knew less the meaning of personal fear, who could look death in the face with calmer or steadier nerves, watching and waiting such as this, when kept up without relaxation for weeks and months at a time, must surely if slowly break down the best and truest of nerves.

To Frank Spartan, even as to the poor blind minstrel, that weary search bade fair to end in death.

The uproar started by the Howler was at its height, when a man hastily entered the saloon, and gliding to the side of Frank Spartan, whispered in his ear:

"Perry Blair's on his feet again, pard, and swears to get even."

A reddish glow filled the black eyes and a tinge of color came into the pale face. His look was that of a man who has just heard most welcome news, and in this look the first feeling which stirred Frank Spartan was not misrepresented. Just then he needed something of the sort to act as a safety valve, and even Perry

Blair could not be more eager for the collision than was the man whose iron fist had sent him headlong to the floor.

But then—he cast a swift glance toward Amelia. Pale, evidently still suffering from that fearful shock, her eyes were downcast as she stood with drooping head beside her father who was conscientiously giving music for money.

"Try to keep him back until I can get these people out of the way, will you?" he hurriedly whispered, forgetting all else in his fear for her. "I'll not be long—he'll find me soon enough!"

"I'll do what I can," was the hasty response, though there was not much encouragement in the look which bore the words company. "He's just red-hot, and swears he'll cut a straight swath to ye!"

"Do the best you can, pard. I'll not forget the favor."

The man turned and left the saloon, while Frank Spartan, hurriedly emptied his hat into his pocket, touched Herman Moskau on the arm with an emphasis that brought the music to an abrupt pause.

It was this pause that brought the mad dance to an end, and led to Howling Jonathan giving the true Western dance-hall finale.

"You must go, and that at once, good friend," Frank Spartan hurriedly uttered in guarded tones. "Amelia is ill—she must have quiet and rest, or you will lose a daughter as well as a son!"

It was no time to pick and choose his words. The main point was to get these helpless ones out of The Mint with the least possible loss of time, and Frank Spartan cared more for Amelia than he did for the feelings of her father.

Without giving the bewildered old man a chance for the quaint speech with which it was his custom to make his bow, he hurried them to the door and out of it, not only before Perry Blair put in an appearance, but without being noticed by Hebrew and his companions at the bar.

As quickly as possible Frank Spartan led his friends around the nearest corner, thinking only of escaping an encounter with the gambler while they were under his wing, nor did he draw a full, free breath until The Mint was lost to view in the night.

"Melie?"

"Yes, father."

"It was too bad you sick become, just so!" gravely uttered the old man. "And you, my good friend, was hurry us off so quick that it was me for of our thanks to the kind people for the money they give us for our boy! That was look bad! They think it a cheat, for—"

"It is for her sake," a little sharply interposed Spartan. "You forget that she is young and tender, not able to bear up under such a trying life for so long at a time without rest. She is breaking down under the weight you cast upon her shoulders, and unless you will listen to sober reason, she will die!"

"Melie? It is not so bad? You will not leave me, too?" feebly, helplessly muttered the blind man.

"Never, father," was the low but firm reply, as her hand tightened its grasp upon his trembling fingers. "Together, you and me, until we find Franz!"

"Or a grave in this cursed country!" almost grated Spartan. "That is what will be the end, and if you were not blind, old friend, you would see this as plain as I can see it."

"It is Franz—it is our boy we must find!"

"And if he is alive, I pledge my word of honor to find him for you. I will set a thousand men to work, if you are afraid to leave the search wholly to me. I will find him and bring him to you, if he is alive. I will find his grave if he is dead. Only—you and Amelia must take some rest and—"

"And so die!" sharply, almost fiercely interposed Herman Moskau, his bowed form drawing erect, his voice strong and clear. "It is this going about that alone keeps life in my heart! It is only when this poor old body is worn out and almost drooping with fatigue, that I can rest or sleep. To stop going—to sit down and wait—that would bring death. And I cannot die until I find my poor boy—no!"

Frank Spartan was silenced, if not convinced. And then they were already at the front of My House, from the saloon of which came the sound of voices. He dared not linger there under the light which streamed from the glass lamps in front of the hotel, and so he opened the side door, entering with the two wanderers, to find himself face to face with widow Watkins.

Her greeting was cordial enough, and it was only when she frankly extended her hand that Spartan made more than a distant, polite recognition by lifting his hat, just as he might have done on coming face to face with a perfect stranger.

A slight flush came into his pale face as her fingers closed warmly, significantly about his, a peculiar light filling her brown eyes.

"Delighted to see you, Mr. Spartan!" she said, her manner almost "gushy." "And, by the way, I have a message to deliver. Will you be so kind as to wait for me a moment in the par-

lor? I will not task your patience long—just enough to see these good people to their rooms."

The young man bowed, following the widow along the narrow passage leading to the room in which she had that evening faced Colonel Joel Mallison after his recognition of the wanderers.

"I must see you!" she muttered, hurriedly, as she held the door open for him to pass by and enter the room. "You will wait?"

"Since you insist—certainly, madam," was the cold response.

"It concerns those two—the blind man and his daughter."

She turned and hastened back to where Amelia and her father were awaiting her, a peculiar light filling her eyes. She knew that Frank Spartan would not attempt to avoid her after those words.

She kept her promise not to make him wait many minutes. She shut the door behind her, turning the key in the lock before facing him.

A swift flush leaped into her face as she saw him smiling coldly, almost sneeringly. For a brief space her eyes drooped, but then they met his gaze firmly, even defiantly as she spoke:

"You are still revengeful, Frank? You have not forgotten?"

"Revengeful? toward a lady?" he echoed, his brows arching. "My dear—pardon me! I have forgotten what name you sail under at the present time!"

He could not have chosen his words better had he studied how to the most surely put her at ease. A low, musical laugh bubbled from her lips, and all constraint disappeared from her manner, as she motioned him to be seated, herself sinking into a chair at a little distance.

"The widow Watkins, my dear friend, and landlady of My House," she said, with a little bow that was perfect in its way. "But I did not imprison you to talk about myself. I wish to talk about Herman Moskau and his daughter."

"My friends," gravely responded the young man.

"So rumor tells me," with just a trace of tartness in her voice.

"For once rumor speaks true."

"When it says that Frank Spartan is over head and ears in love with this girl! Do you admit that, too?"

Sharp and almost harsh sounded her voice as she uttered these words, and there came the same aged, gray shade and look into her face that marked it not many minutes before, when in the company of Colonel Joel Mallison. She leaned forward in her chair, her eyes aglow, fixed on the face of the young man, who gravely bowed as he said:

"I admit it, and am proud to do so—yes."

"That you love this child of a blind beggar? That you seek to wed her? Do you dare say this—and to my very face?"

That cold, sneering smile came back to the face of the man as he listened to these swiftly put questions. The hot anger which filled the face of widow Watkins seemed to give him pleasure rather than alarm or annoyance.

"Why not, my dear madam? We are as much strangers as though you and I had never met each other before this night."

"Frank—you know you are lying!"

"I am speaking the truth, no more, no less," was his calm retort. "If we were ever more to each other than—"

"If!" echoed the woman, her eyes glowing vividly.

Still cold and contained as though the most disinterested of persons, Frank Spartan added:

"If you ever had any rights to take me to task, to pry into my private affairs, you surrendered that right when you eloped that—"

"I was mad—I did not know what I was doing!" muttered the woman, bowing her head and covering her face with her hands, her graceful form quivering with strong emotions.

"Yet you had been warned plainly enough. You could not have forgotten the understanding which we had when you first came to me. It was full and explicit enough, one would think, for even your short memory. But let it be as it may; you took your choice, and I never once blamed you. I said you were a woman, and that was excuse sufficient for even your conduct—then."

"And now, Frank?" lifting her face, catching at the sudden alteration in his voice as he uttered that last word.

"Now—you are widow Mercy Watkins, and I am the promised husband of a true-hearted, pure and angel girl."

If the first words were tinged with irony, the last were spoken almost in reverence, and widow Watkins was woman enough to know that they came from the very bottom of his heart.

What would have convinced a man the fight was worse than vain, only served to urge her on, to make her play the card she held in reserve with increased cunning and force.

She flung back her head with a careless, graceful gesture, all anger vanishing from her face as though by magic. She smiled, and there was even the trace of laughter in her voice as she spoke:

"Well, what the fates will must come to pass,

I suppose, and it is only a fool who stops to weep over spilt milk when the woods are full of fresh cows! One cannot have and throw away, too! Which proves the old proverb a lie when it says that a woman and a philosopher never wore the same clothes!"

"Was it this you wished me to listen to?" a little sharply asked the young man, with a quick glance at his watch. "If so, it will keep better than an appointment which is waiting."

"You have had trouble about her?" swiftly demanded the widow, seeming to read his face rather than his words. "You are going to fight on her account?"

"If there is to be any fight, it is on my own account," coldly.

"You must love her very dearly. Time was when you swore no woman on earth was worth fighting over."

"At what time to-morrow can you see me, Mrs. Watkins?" he asked, rising to his feet and moving toward the door.

"I prefer to see you this evening, unless you are so frightened that you elect to break down the door," laughed the widow, holding up the key, then slipping it into her bosom.

For one moment Frank Spartan hesitated, but then resumed his seat, a hard smile playing about his lips.

"When I am charged with hiding from an enemy, I'll have to send them to you for an excuse, then."

Once more he had chosen his words right well, and without any further beating about the bush, widow Watkins spoke to the point:

"You are deeply interested in these people. You have offered a large reward for any information leading to the discovery of either Franz Moskau or his partner, Morris Grant. Am I rightly informed?"

"You are," lowed Frank Spartan; but her eyes sparkled even more vividly as she saw the interest written upon his face.

"Have patience, then, and it is barely possible that I may be able to give you a clue. If so—you would be grateful?"

"Try me and see," he uttered, his voice deep and earnest.

"That is by far too vague, my dear friend," with a low, mocking laugh. "You must put it in plainer terms, or I fear my memory will prove treacherous. In plain words, what will you give to be placed on the right trail?"

"You know?—you can tell me where to look for Franz Moskau?" he cried, his face all aglow, his voice trembling with eagerness.

Widow Watkins laughed softly, leaning back in her chair, gazing at him through her half-closed lashes.

"You should cultivate animation, my dear boy. It makes you absolutely handsome, and—"

"Will you answer me?" he gratingly interposed, the color fading from his face, his black eyes glowing dangerously.

"After me is manners, you understand," and the widow bowed with ironical politeness. "When you have answered a few questions for me, I will—or will not, according to your election—answer yours."

It was a dangerous game she was playing, but the experience of the past had taught widow Watkins that Frank Spartan would never use actual violence toward a woman, let her sin be never so black. And even though she knew she was lessening her very faint chance of gaining the end on which she had set her heart by thus mocking him, she could not forbear. Revenge is sweet, and his cold contempt of a short time before had cut her to the very quick.

Frank Spartan settled back in his chair, banishing all anger, all interest from his handsome face.

"At your service, Mrs. Watkins. Pray don't let me hurry you," he said, quietly, feeling that he must meet her with her own weapons if he hoped to win the game.

"First, you have more than an ordinary interest in hurrying up the finding of Franz Moskau. Am I not right?"

A slight inclination of his head was the sole response.

She laughed, with just the suspicion of a sneer in her voice.

"You need not be so cautious, so reserved. The fair Amelia told me all, and more than, I ask you, Frank."

"The less need of my wasting valuable time, then, by repetition."

"But if I prefer hearing it from your lips?" she persisted.

His brow drew together, his jaws squared, but it was only for a moment. He knew from past experience that there was little use in trying to drive her from a position once taken, unless by a greater waste of time than he could just then afford. And he knew, too, that Amelia must have told her something of the truth, if not the whole story, from the amount of knowledge she had already exhibited.

All this passed through his mind in an instant, and his brows resumed their wonted smoothness as he spoke:

"I will set you a good example, Mrs. Watkins. It is true, I have the greatest interest in speedily finding Franz Moskau, or his grave

If what I have to say causes you any pain, you have but yourself to blame."

"Which, being interpreted, means?"

"I have told Amelia Moskau that I love her, with the first, the only true and pure love of my life. I have won her admission that she loves me in return. I pressed her to marry me at once, that I might have the right before the world to guard and cherish her, but she would not prove untrue to the vow she made, with her blind father, to suffer naught to interfere with the search for the missing son and brother."

"I told her that I would join them in the quest, and work all the more faithfully because I was looking for a brother, too, but the old man was afraid, and she listened to him. She said that she would marry me the day after the fate of Franz was decided."

"She put the same meaning into a slightly different shape, when she made confession to me," slowly interjected the widow.

"And she was right," corrected Frank, flushing a little beneath that close and burning gaze. "She said that until the mystery covering the fate of her brother was forever dispelled, she would never marry!"

A low, almost fierce cry escaped the red lips of the woman as she sprung to her feet, her face fairly glowing, her eyes seeming on fire.

"That settles it, then! Frank Spartan, it rests with you whether or no the mystery enshrouding Franz Moskau is ever lifted!"

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the man, but little less excited, though he strove hard to control himself.

"It means that I have been a fool—more and worse than a fool, Frank!" she said, her hands tightly clasped before her, the lurid glow still in her eyes, but a far different look upon her face, now pale and strained. "It means that I was wild, insane, when I fled from you! It means that even when I ran away, I was loving you more fiercely than ever before in my life! Frank—is it too late?"

It was no longer acting, but deep, intense earnest. Even he could not doubt this, though his face grew hard and stern again.

"I am not quite sure I fully understand you, Mercy."

"Will not, why don't you say?" with a sudden outburst of fire. "But you must—you shall not have even the shadow of an excuse. It is not the first time we have spoken of love, Frank!"

"The past has many sins to answer for, Mrs. Watkins."

A sharp cry parted her lips.

"Cold—cold and hard and sneering! It was that that drove me into taking that rash and much regretted step, my love! You drove me wild with your careless indifference. I thought I would spur you into life and action. I left a plain trail behind me, and I felt sure you would follow me—then it would all come right again. But you never made a move! You never took one step toward recovering me!"

"Why should I?" with a coldness plainly sincere. "I was just as glad to lose you as I believed you were to be lost. You killed what I fancied was love, with your petty tantrums. You—but why bring up the past, Mrs. Watkins? It is not so pleasant, not so sweet-scented!"

She must have seen how utterly dead was the passion, such as that passion had been; dead beyond all resurrection; but she would not even yet abandon all hope.

"The present—the future, then! Think of that. Think of your oath to discover the fate of this missing man!"

"I am thinking of it, and if I could feel even the faintest temptation to bring back our old life, Mercy, that very thought would drive it forever from my mind," was the quick retort.

"Think of her—of this milk-and-water girl whom you fancy you are in love with! Think how she is failing, worn out by this never-ending search—think of what she told me, only this evening, that she felt she was dying!"

There was a triumphant ring in her voice as she uttered these words, that brought an angry flush to his cheek. Yet he knew that she was only voicing the same fear that had given him such bitter agony of late. He knew that she was speaking no more than the truth.

"Now listen to my last proposition, Frank Spartan," the widow added, her voice growing calmer, though her determination seemed even the more settled. "I can save this love of yours. I can solve the mystery of her brother's fate, if not by pointing him out in person, by telling you where you can find the one man who can reveal all—Morris Grant!"

"Do that and we will call you blessed!" he impulsively cried.

A low, hard laugh broke from her lips, one hand flinging out in a scornful, bitter gesture.

"That is not my price, Frank Spartan, as you very well know. But one reward can unlock my lips, and if you really love this girl, you will not think twice before coming to my terms."

"She would scorn any such offer, dearly as she loves her brother."

"Of course; that is to be expected," with a hard laugh. "But it is you I am dealing with,

not her. You can see that this blind quest is slowly but surely wearing out her young life. That blind fool will drag her along until she falls into the grave. And you can save her from this! You can give her joy, her blind father the precious boon he craves and starves for. And at what cost to yourself? Surely it is not such a frightful price to pay, Frank? Surely it will not be so difficult to revive the past? I love you so—I will be true and faithful as I can be loving—and you know I never lacked on that score, Frank!"

Not acting now. In deadly earnest, and with her mad, insane love showing in every line of her face, in her glowing eyes, in her every word. But the man to whom she offered all this grew harder and colder instead of melting as she hoped and prayed.

"What you know I can discover, Mrs. Watkins, without paying any such exorbitant price. Will you be so kind as to unlock the door? Or shall I break it down?"

"Look out, Frank Spartan!" the widow grated betwixt her tightly clinched teeth. "As I love, so I can hate—beyond all bounds! Refuse me now, and it will be the worse for you! It will be a thousand-fold worse for this milk-faced doll! Think twice before you decide, I warn you!"

"You have my answer," was the cold reply. "I love but one woman, and be sure her name is not Mrs. Mercy Watkins."

"And that woman—shall be the bride of death—never yours!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE HOWLER UPHOLDS THE LAW.

"CHOOSE partners an'— Now I will be durned!"

Slapping his emptied glass on the bar with more force than ceremony, Howling Jonathan Hebrew spun a dollar beside it, then making a dash for another victim as he roared out the command, only to break off with a loud snort of utter disgust as he discovered the absence of the musician.

"Is he gone pard?" hoarsely whispered the red-haired tornado in the ear of his intended partner, wondering awe written on his every feature. "Is he clean gone, or has he only gone down into his pocket to look fer a piece o' rosin?"

"Gone slick and clean—good-luck go with him!" was the prompt response, though the latter portion came in a much lower pitch and only when the relieved miner had fairly escaped the grip of Howling Jonathan.

Slowly shaking his shaggy head, paying no attention to the laughs which greeted him from all sides, the Howler moved toward the seat where he had last seen Herman Moskau, lifting the chair up and looking at its bottom, at the floor under the table, then turning his eyes upward toward the ceiling.

"Gone glimmerin', shimmerin' up the golden stairs! Tuck a short cut back to j'ine in the celestial quier, an' never left hole, crack nor scratch on the ceilin' to tell a dumb critter how he did it! Gone from our midst, an' never so much as left us a lock o' his ha'r or a note fer us to keep his mem'ry green over! Holy smoke from Abraham's fricassee'd young 'un! Good Leather must be gittin' 'ligion, less they would n't sech a merricle come to pass inside her copperation!"

Howling Jonathan shook his head with grave emphasis as he arrived at this conclusion, but there was at least one person present who took a much more practical view of the situation.

"It was fun alive while it lasted, but I ain't sheddin' no briny 'cause the fiddle's sloped—I ain't! I'm puttin' in my time thinkin' how 'pizen lucky we all is that Iceberg Dave didn't drap in on us while we was hoeing it down, I am!"

"Durn a critter that'd 'feet to a little honest 'musement like them!" snorted Howling Jonathan, supreme disgust written on his glowing countenance. "Iceberg is one o' my best fri'nds, though I don't know him from a side o' smoked bacon, but ef he's that kind o' tarrapin, I hain't got no more use fer him then a greaser he's o' buckwheat pancakes fer to git up a scratch!"

"Pard," and the jolly digger solemnly tapped the red-headed cyclone on the arm with one stumpy fore-finger. "Pard, I admire your grit, but I don't bank a red on your judgment. In other words, ef you're dead-set on tellin' Iceberg them sentiments, won't you let me know long enough ahead o' time so I kin climb a tree?"

"It's a whack, pard!" and Howling Jonathan gripped the horny hand of the digger in ardent grip. "I'll send ye notice, gilt-edged an' done up in a pink onwollup. An' ef you don't see gobs o' fun, it'll be fer reason the fire flashin' from my two eyes'll melt the iceberg to hot water afore I kin git my hooks onto it! It's Howlin' Jonathan that tells ye, honey; an' the ghost of a lie or the shadow of a brag would split his throat so wide open you could use it fer a barn-door!"

Little by little the crowd in the saloon proper was thinning out, the majority going back to the tables which they had deserted at the first strain from the blind man's violin. A few remained in the bar-room, gathered in couples or triplets, eagerly discussing the collision which

had so recently occurred. And though their opinions seemed to be about equally divided as to the merits of the men, it was unanimously agreed that the affair could end only in a fight to the death.

This discussion appeared to have little interest in it for Howling Jonathan, and he shortly deserted the bar for the tables, confidentially observing to the facetious digger with whom he was arm-in-arm:

"They ain't no music to me like a fiddle, an' I'll rather shake my foot then to eat; but ef I can't hev good bread an' butter, I'll eat fruit-cake afore I'll starve! The fiddle's collapsed her flues, but the tiger is left ahind. Come an' see how clean a holy terror from 'way up kin clip the animile's claws, honey!"

Already the two faro lay-outs were well crowded, but the Terror from Headwaters experienced no difficulty in making his way close up to the table. He was already a marked man in Good Leather, and room was quickly made for him as soon as his voice made itself known.

"Bite quick an' bite deep, gents, ef you don't want to git up from this lay-out full o' emptiness an' hunger," warningly uttered the Holy Terror with a grim determination as he squared himself at the table, his keen eyes running over the painted cards and the silver dealing-box. "Tain't often I go fer the menadgery, but when I do, they ain't even a smell o' wild meat left ahind me! Pard, that ain't toppin' the limit, I hope?"

Howling Jonathan slapped a silver dollar on one of the cards, gazing anxiously into the cold, business-like face of the dealer opposite. Not even the ghost of a smile played about his thin, straight lips as the dealer compared the bet with the neat stacks of chips indicating the capital of the bank that night.

"A dollar goes, pard, but don't hit us too often with a sledge-hammer like that; give the bank a living chance, please!"

"They ain't no fri'ndship in business, pard," said the Howler, gravely shaking his head as he watched the cards slip one by one from the case. "I'd down my own pap ef so be he was settin' on the wrong side o' the lay-out from me, ef I wota— Didn't I tell ye so?" with a subdued howl, as his stake came winner. "Luck ag'in science, an' I'm his prophet! Grit your teeth, tiger, but here's comin' fer more o' your wool. Good Lawd! but I'm on it to-night bigger 'n a wolf!"

It was a flagrant violation of all gaming laws, of course, but no one of the players seemed to care enough about their rights to rebuke this rattle-tongue. They knew Jonathan was not *all* wind. They knew he had shown "good leather" in the affair with Captain Clean-up and his gang, to say nothing of the positive manner in which he had made Colonel Joel Mallison "take water." And while they would, one and all, heartily enjoy seeing him effectually "squelched," each preferred to leave that job to some other individual.

"An still the tide o' fortune runs my way, smooth as a buzz-saw through the finger o' the critter as tries to pint out how 'farnal fast the teeth is movin'!" chuckled the Howler as his second venture proved equally lucky. "It's a durned shame that I can't do my winnin' 'thout lettin' you all into the secret o' my rule, gents, but they won't be many o' you that'll git fat on this bank—no, sir! I'm a holy hog when I git my nose in a trough filed with grub like this, an' what I leave wouldn't make a 'suar' meal fer the ghost of a flea! The more I eat the hungrier I git. Third time's the charm, an' you kin begin to unpack your mournin', pardner, fer the bank's goin' bu'st this clatter, dead sure!"

Solemnly Jonathan slapped two dollars down on the ace, sinking back in his chair, his red cheeks puffed out, his shaggy brows drooping down over his little eyes, his breath coming in short, heavy puffs through his dilated nostrils.

But only for a moment did he maintain this ridiculous position, for as loud voices suddenly broke out in the saloon, uttering among others the words "coward" and "fraud," the Terror shoved back his seat and "jumped the game" without a second thought of his mighty stake.

Though there were others who seemed to care more for "fun" than gambling, Howling Jonathan was the first man to pass through the open archway that joined the two apartments.

The angry speaker was Perry Blair, the middle-aged gambler whom Frank Spartan had knocked down so cleverly a short time before. He bore the imprint of the iron knuckles still, though it was clear to the initiated that a knife or lance had been called into play to let out the blood that would otherwise have well-nigh closed his eye for him. The livid bruise formed an ugly contrast to his ghastly white face and his redly glowing eyes.

"He sent me word that he would meet me here, if I wanted to get even, and now I have come, where is he? Sneaked off like the cowardly fraud I pronounced him! Crawled into his hole to hide from a man! Frank Spartan is a cur! And if he has a friend present who dares to stand up for him, I'll make my word good or—"

"Or bust a flue!"

Perry Blair whirled about with hand on revolver, to meet the red face and blue eyes of the Howler, quieter and cooler than any one in Good Leather had as yet seen him.

"It was my gentle bazoo that made ye slip-flop, pard," and his voice was gentle, almost apologetic as he spoke. "Ye don't know who I be, I reckon, but that's a fault easy got over. I'm Howlin' Jonathan, a Holy Terror just come in from Headwaters, an' I'm the best fri'nd to the gent you've bin takin' the name in vain."

The gambler showed his teeth in a vicious snarl as he grated:

"What have you got to do with it? What is Frank Spartan to you?"

"Waal, pardner, that 'pends some on which eye ye look at it out of. One way I hain't the ghost of a right to chip in, seein' as it's 'nother rooster you're crowin' 'fiance to, but—"

"Then hold your yawp and save your chips for a game that better suits your caliber, curse you!" snapped Blair, like more than one of those present taking this moderate tone and even gentle demeanor to be but the prelude to the "crawfish act."

"It's a waste o' time an' good material, that I know jest as well as ary man livin', but is a critter to starve to death holdin' out fer a hull hog, when they's spar'-rits layin' cluss by? It's mighty small an' monstrous slow pickin', but ef you cain't git jest what you want, take what ye kin. Penny-ante is heap better then no game, an' so, meanin' no 'fense to you, pardner, I reckon I wouldn't mind steppin' into the boots o' Frank Spartan, onless you kin shove out a bigger an' better man to tackle the Terror!"

This was a widely different conclusion from the one Perry Blair had anticipated from that moderate, even deprecatory tone, and he stood glowering at the red-haired champion half in rage, half in doubt.

"That's the one question answered the best I know how, pardner," placidly added the Howler, yet with a peculiar something in his tone and looks that held the crowd interested enough to leave him a clear field. "As fer the other, mebbe you never hear tell on the Hebrew children? Mebbe you never read o' Shadrach, Mes-hach, an' To-bel-we-go? Mebbe you don't know that I'm them an' them's me, Howlin' Jonathan Hebrew, the Terror right from Headwaters!"

With a short, angry curse, Perry Blair turned on his heel as though feeling this red-headed champion was too far beneath him for further notice. All his former hatred burst forth anew, as he grated:

"If Frank Spartan has a friend within sound of my voice, let him carry my words to the runaway sport! Tell him that I brand him as a cowardly cur, too infernally low for any white man to dirty the sole of his boot with! Tell him that—"

"He's one o' the Hebrew triplets, an' I'm the others," curtly interjected a voice, and once more Perry Blair wheeled with drawn revolver to confront the Howler.

The Terror stood his ground, though the gambler was in a red-hot rage, his face fairly transfigured, his eyes all aglow. He must have seen the drawn pistol, but if so he showed no trace of uneasiness, nor did he make any move toward arming himself, one hand lifted with forefinger shaking deliberately in front of that knuckle-marked face.

"I'm the most peaceable critter that ever kepted on two legs, pardner, an' many a time I've been broke back running to git away from some tech-mighty blooder for as you think you're right now; but when you troup on the corns of my pet brother, an' be a triplet of which I'm the best, then I've got to howl right out in me an' all. An' when I howl I say something. An' that something in this case is that Frank Spartan is a lot o' more maudlin an' cur an' genuine good leather every time he blows his nose than was ever wrapped up in the clothes of the Blair family, with you at the head, pardner!"

For one moment Perry Blair stood like a man dumfounded, but as a lurch came from the armed leader on at this decidedly original comparison, a savage snarl ripped through his teeth and he made a swift motion with his pistol arm.

There was a rapid shifting as the weapon exploded, and then a man staggered back—but it was not Howling Jonathan.

The lead spent its force on the wall, while the Terror, with a force that could not be resisted, hurled the disarmed gambler across the room, fairly into the arms of the tall, thin, dyspeptic looking individual with whom the Howler had opened the impromptu dance an hour or less before.

And those who followed the reeling gambler with their eyes, caught a glimmer of polished steel, heard a metallic clicking sound, and then—a cry of wonder broke from their lips as the tall man freed his right hand to display a revolver, while Perry Blair cursed viciously as he stared in stupid wonder at the steel manacles upon his wrists!

"Fun alive!" and Howling Jonathan set up his thrilling, ear-splitting war-cry. "Turn the

Hebrew children loose an' give 'em room 'cordin' to thar bizness! The safety valve's dropped off, an' I'm blowin' off steam that's hot enough to raise a blister on a cast-iron monkey at forty rod! Shove that cocktail for'ard! Rub kyann pepper in his tail feathers an' sting him up to meet a— Look out, pardner!"

"Keep your distance, my good fellow, unless you want a high lot on the hillside free of charge!" sharply cried the dyspeptic man, his gray eyes gleaming coldly over the leveled tube of death. "Perry Blair is my prisoner, and—"

His voice was drowned by a howl from the crowd, until then too much surprised to make any decided move. And Perry Blair aided in this as his voice rose in savage curses, his tempered muscles trying to snap the slender links which connected the handcuffs, his practiced feet to trip up his captor.

But a long arm held him off, fingers of steel shifted from his shoulder to his neck, and clear above the tumult rose the voice of the man who had so deftly ironed the gambler. And the muzzle of his pistol was now turned toward the skull of his captive to emphasize the words that came hardly from his thin lips:

"Keep your distance, gentlemen, unless you want to murder this man! You can't take him from my grip alive. The law is on my side, and in its name I command you one and all to stand clear!"

"What's he done? What right hev you to kick up a row when two gents was jest hev'n' a little fun to pass away the time? Who be ye, anyhow?" indignantly cried Jonathan, but at the same time falling back a pace or two.

"I'm a detective—see!" and a quick motion of the revolver opened his coat far enough to reveal a gleaming badge. "I have a warrant for this person, for robbery and murder. I have arrested him, and now, it is in the name of law and justice, I call on all respectable citizens to stand by me as the representative of the law!"

His swift appeal appeared to have its effect, for several men moved toward him, their faces to the rest of the party, their hands filling with weapons. And then Hebrew strode forward, a broad grin on his face, a peculiar twang in his voice as he cried:

"That's a boss of another color, an' ef the law says so, I say so, an' durn the odds! Mebbe I'll need the good natur' o' the law myself some o' these days, an' so I'll git a under grip onter her while I kin. Nothin' like layin' up grub for a hungry time, pards, an' I reckon you want to shinnny on this side, too!"

If this peculiar appeal had any effect on the rest, it was not immediately visible. There were dark looks and sullen mutterings. Strong hands gripped deadly weapons, and it would take but little to cause an outburst where death would claim more than one victim.

Every one then present appeared to realize this, and the knowledge made each man slow to make any decided move. There were no lack of followers, but none who wished to play the part of leader.

The detective saw this, and his hard, menacing tone perceptibly softened as he added:

"I am simply performing my duty as a sworn officer of the law, gentlemen. I was sent here to make this arrest, and I had to do it, just as I would arrest him again, though I knew certain death awaited the action. I trust there will be no further trouble, but if there is, it is my duty to tell you that the warrant I am acting on, says *dead or alive*! If I am ordered too hard, it will be *dead*!"

"You grip tight the critter, pard, an' I'll watch out fer the crowdin'," cried Howling Jonathan, a revolver in each hand, his face stern and business-like.

"We'll stay with you, friend," quietly uttered one of the three men who had first stepped to the aid of the detective.

"They're all birds of a feather!" growled an ugly voice from among the excited crowd. "Strangers, every one of them! It's a put-up job to down Perry—"

His voice was drowned by the three cry raised by the particular friends of the ironed gambler, and for a few moments it seemed as if the crisis was at hand. Suddenly and resolutely the three men closed about the stricken cur, cursing, snarling, captive, their weapons cocked and ready for instant use when the fight could no longer be avoided. The tall detective turned the muzzle of his weapon to the head of the prisoner. Howling Jonathan formed the advance guard, his red hair fairly bristling, his little eyes flaming, his athletic figure fairly quivering as his muscles tightened for the desperate struggle which seemed inevitable.

Then, clear and stern came the voice of the detective:

"Tell your friends to keep their distance, Perry Blair, if you love life! The first blow they strike, will be the signal for me to blow the roof of your skull off! I swear to this!"

The gambler was not a coward, physically speaking, and if he could have seen even the shadow of a chance to escape instant death, he would have called for a charge instead of a retreat. But his hands were ironed. That terri-

ble grip on his neck was causing his breath to come hot and thick, his brain to buzz and whirl dizzily, the strength to desert his limbs. And the cold muzzle of a revolver was pressing against his skull, telling only too plainly of death.

"Let up, boys!" he gasped hoarsely, ceasing his vain struggles and hanging limp and heavy on the arm of his captor. "Wait for a better opening, then—"

His voice died away as those fingers closed tighter about his neck, but he had said enough to avert the crisis for a time at least.

And just at that moment a tall, athletic form leaped into the room from the street, holding a cocked pistol in his left hand, glaring keenly about as though seeking some particular person in the crowd.

"Iceberg Dave! This way if you're a man!" he cried, his voice hard and strained, his weapon partially raised, murder in his eyes.

"Ugly Dan!" came in half a dozen voices from the startled crowd, as it parted to leave a free passage for the desperado.

"Ugly Dan it is, and on the war-path!" prated the man, shaking his bloody-banded right hand in the air with a fierce curse. "Ugly Dan, come to get even with Iceberg Dave for a coward shot from cover and behind my back! Where is he? Gone—hiding, the cowardly cur!" he answered his own question as his keen eyes saw the cool sport was not present.

A move on the part of the detective with his prisoner, still surrounded by his guard, hoping to clear the saloon under cover of this fresh excitement, attracted his attention, and as the lamplight flashed across the detective's badge, a sudden light filled his eyes and he cried in a quick, vicious tone:

"I swear that Iceberg Dave is in one of Captain Clean-up's gangs of road-agents! I can prove it! I'll help arrest him, if you—"

"I'll see you later, my friend," coldly interposed the detective, pressing with his half-choked prisoner toward the door.

Ugly Dan made no attempt to stay them, and the others were too completely demoralized for the time being to take decided action. The door was gained, and a moment later the little party was hastening away from The Mint, the Howler guarding the rear and keeping an eye open to a possible rush from the saloon. But none such came, and this was in part due to the opportune appearance in the room of Ugly Dan.

The detective took his hand from the throat of Perry Blair, and a few long breaths strengthened that worthy sufficiently so he could keep pace with his captors without much assistance. And by the time they reached the front of My House, he was alert enough to recognize the tall, athletic figure that came out of the building, and to burst forth into a savage curse.

"You cur! This is your cowardly work!" he grated, his figure quivering in every fiber as he held up his manacled hands in the bright glow of the lamps.

With a startled exclamation Frank Spartan stared for a moment at the speaker, then hurried forward, his face showing pale as death, his black eyes glowing with a reddish light, his voice hard and strained.

"What does all this mean? It is you, Perry Blair?"

"You low-down cur!" snarled the gambler, his lips fairly tinged with froth. "You ask that? You—bah! what is shame to you?"

Frank Spartan turned to the tall man who held the prisoner firmly as he attempted to push him onward.

"What has this man done? What right have you to arrest him?"

"You can't cover it up that way, Frank Spartan!" grated Blair. "You sent me word that you'd wait to give me a chance to get even for that coward blow, but instead you hunted your hole and trumped up this dirty lie to save your hide! But I'll get even with you yet, you—"

A strong grip choked off his flood of curses and epithets, and the detective warningly waved a revolver toward the other, saying:

"I've arrested this man on a regular warrant, and if you care for your own head, young man, you will think twice before interfering."

"If you are what you say, of course I can do nothing. But you have heard what this man says. In justice to myself, I'll investigate your rights, and unless you can prove your title clear I'll set him free if I have to kill you and all your allies! That is sworn to, sir."

A clicking, savage snarl came from the lips of the prisoner as he managed to free his throat long enough to utter:

"Too thin, you cowardly cur! You set up this job, but it will not die out with my voice, thank the devil! It's all over town by this time and it will ring in your ears until you sit your own—"

"Let me see him! Let me see him just once!" came a shrill, peculiar voice from beyond, and out of the shadows came a crouching, shuffling figure toward the little group. "It sounds like his voice—the voice of the devil who—"

"No crowdin', honey!" grated the Howler as he stepped before the newcomer, one heavy hand lifted warningly. "It wouldn't be healthy

I don't think! Better hunt your hole ag'in an' wait for another procession to come along."

"I *must* see him—it is like the voice of that hell-bound, I tell you!" and the ragged object pressed forward, unheeding if he saw the clinched and threatened fist.

Jonathan showed a forbearance unusual in one of his stamp, and instead of knocking the intruder down, he pushed him back, saying:

"Better you didn't, pard! I don't want to hurt ye, but—"

"I *must* see his face!" panted the stranger, struggling vainly to press forward, then his tone changed to a piteous pleading: "I beg it of you, dear sir! Just one glimpse of his face! It will cool my poor brain and—I will see him!"

The last words came almost in a scream, and bright steel flashed in the lamplight, but Howling Jonathan proved equal to the emergency, his left arm knocking aside the armed hand, his right fist shooting out and sending the stranger reeling away, to drop heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER XII.

UGLY DAN ON THE WAR-PATH.

"KEEP your hooks on him an' look out fer snags, pard!" sharply warned the Terror, with a glance over his shoulder toward the detective in charge of Perry Blair. "Mebbe it's a trick to climb us an' sot him free, but I reckon I kin tell better—The devil!"

He sprang forward to the shadow at the edge of which the ragged fellow had fallen under the powerful blow, but the ground was bare, nor could he distinguish any fleeing form, glare about keenly as he might, though he did catch sight of a tall figure striding hastily toward the hotel, coming from the direction of The Mint.

"Ugly Dan!" and his brows contracted sharply as he turned back to the detective and party, muttering: "No time to lose, pardner. Best git to kiver whar ye kin stan' some show o' bluffin' off a gang ef so be they come fer us red-hot. Out here—waal, I reckon you kin see!"

"They may get us, but Perry Blair won't be worth much to them," was the grim observation as the detective forced his half-crazed prisoner forward, with a warning glance toward Frank Spartan, who made a move in the same direction.

His handsome face was very white and very hard-set as he spoke:

"I am one of the party, until I am satisfied that everything is on the square, and that you have a perfect right to arrest this man. If I find a single flaw in your side of the case, I'll set him free or go over the range in trying! That is sworn to!"

Howling Jonathan fell a few paces behind the remainder of the party, as Ugly Dan came on at a half run, and choosing a point where a line of shade deeper than usual would partially cover him, the red-haired deputy wheeled and cried sharply:

"They's a dozen small-pox flags hung out right afore ye, pardner! Better check yer mad career an' make a break the other way afore ye ketch yer everlastin' sickness! It's a heap friind that's talkin'!"

"That's all right, old fellow," was the prompt reply, as Ugly Dan briefly paused in the clear light, holding up his hands, both free from weapons. "I'm a friend, ready and anxious to aid the cause of justice. You'll need all the strong arms you can get before you clear Good Leather with Perry Blair."

He moved forward as he uttered the last words, and Howling Jonathan made no further objection. He realized the truth of that statement, and he had heard enough of Ugly Dan to know that his reputation would aid them more than his weapons, even.

With his three men forming a compact guard about himself and his prisoner, the detective hurried Perry Blair on through the town, coming to a pause before a low, squat structure composed of stone and mud. He nodded to one of his followers, who unfastened the heavy door of hewn slabs, and then assumed charge of the prisoner long enough to place him out of harm's way within. As for the detective, he turned upon Frank Spartan, who had kept them close company to the building.

"Now, sir, I'll settle with you," he said, sharply.

"I intend you shall, and I give you free warning that there must be no half-way about it, either," was the sharp response. "You want to show your authority for taking Perry Blair prisoner. You want to make out a perfectly clear case against him, or I swear to set him free though it costs my life and the lives of a score better men!"

The young man was intensely wrought up, and showed this fact in his every tone and movement. He had been kept on such a trying strain for weeks and months past; he had not come out of his scene with widow Mercy Watkins wholly unshaken, though he had so cleverly left her with an exactly opposite opinion; and this savage charge made by the gambler had stung him to the very quick. He was dangerous, as one far less experienced than the tall detective could readily divine.

"The last would be far more likely to happen than the first, my dear sir," he laughed, coldly,

knowing that he was playing with fire, but finding it hard to swallow such sharp threats.

With a powerful effort Frank Spartan crushed down his hot temper, and in a few words explained just how he stood in relation to the prisoner, adding:

"This is why I take such an interest in the matter, and why I say to you, by all that men hold holy! unless you can satisfy me that you are keeping fully within the pale of the law in making this arrest, I will set Perry Blair free or die in the attempt! With a single cry I can set a mob to howling for your blood. If you are not a blind idiot, you can see what the end would be."

"Heaps o' fun, you bet!" chimed in the Howler, with a reckless laugh, as he and Ugly Dan came up just in time to catch this last hot speech. "Be durned ef it was *me* runnin' things, I'd show up my papers to choke off the bloodthirsty critter—I would so!"

"As I am ready to do now that the prisoner is in safe quarters," coldly uttered the detective—"as I would have done without any of this talk, if you had shown a little less bluster, young man."

Frank Spartan cared little for the manner in which his demands were met, just so he received the data by which he could clear his manhood of the foul charge flung in his teeth by Perry Blair. Keenly, carefully he examined the documents produced by the detective by the light of a pocket lantern, finding them genuine and complete.

"Are you satisfied, sir?" half-sneered the detective, as he took back the papers and stowed them carefully away.

"I must be, though I'd give a finger if you had delayed the arrest an hour!" frowned the young man.

The detective laughed, shortly, replying:

"Only for you, Perry Blair would still be at liberty, my dear sir!"

Frank Spartan turned upon him with a fierce ejaculation, but the officer of the law laughed lightly as he held up a hand in truce.

"It is the solemn fact, my dear fellow, though you never knew it until this moment. I heard of your row, and of the fight that would almost surely follow. I wanted to let Perry Blair run a little longer, for reasons which needn't be particularized, but he was too valuable to run the risk of losing in a duel. So, you see, it is partly your fault that he is in limbo this early."

"He may not remain so long," gravely warned Frank Spartan, with an effort, casting aside his own interest in the case. "He has many friends here in Good Leather, and they'll be almost sure to raise a crowd to down you and release him. For my own sake I'd like to see it done, but as an honest man I feel it my duty to give you this warning. Get him out of town as quickly and as quietly as you can. Travel mighty fast, or find a secure hiding-place, if you want to bring him to the bar."

"I reckon we can manage it, sir," smiled the detective.

"All right. I've done my duty. It is you for it now," coldly uttered Spartan, turning on his heel and striding away.

As he did so, he fairly brushed shoulders with Ugly Dan, who now pushed past Jonathan, and faced the detective, his voice hard and full of a vicious hatred as he uttered:

"You wouldn't listen to me back there, and I'm not blaming you. But now your game is safe caged, and you've got to hear me through!"

"You are the fellow people call Ugly Dan, I believe?"

"Never you mind my name; it's about Iceberg Dave—David Ingram, in full—that I want to talk. I swear he is one of the gang of road-agents, and ten thousand times more deserving of arrest than Perry Blair! I can give you plenty of proof, and—"

"Iceberg Dave crippled your hand, didn't he?" coldly interjected the tall detective.

"What has that got to do with it, curse ye?" snarled the other.

"Quite as much as I have to do with Iceberg Dave," was the careless retort. "Settle your own quarrels."

"But I accuse him of being an outlaw and a road-agent!"

"And I don't care if he is Captain Clean-up himself! I came here in search of a particular criminal, and I've got him. I have no authority to arrest any other, Iceberg Dave, Ugly Dan or the devil! If you can prove your charge, why don't you take the fellow yourself and claim the rewards, if any are offered?" coldly uttered the detective.

"D—d if I don't, then!" snarled Ugly Dan, his eyes glowing viciously, turning on his heel, knowing that after his public charge that evening, he must either take or be taken.

"An' be letter d dash d ef I ain't goin' long to see the fun, my beauty!" cried the Howler, with a bound gaining the side of the desperado. I'm on it to-night, wuss then a nest o' ram-cats, an' ef this yer' chunk o' coldness you're lookin' fer hes got a few o' his 'lutions swimmin' in the same channel, mebbe I kin git a bite at the free lunch afore the boss kicks us all out-doors!"

Ugly Dan growled shortly as the red-haired cyclone took his arm, and there was a half-sus-

picious glitter in his eyes as he looked into that hairy face. But the Howler seemed to be wholly at ease, and his nimble tongue rattled on so freely that Ugly Dan soon forgot his doubts, for they were faint and undefined at the most.

"Tain't that I want to crowd in whar I ain't wanted, pard, fer I'm one o' the most bashfullest critters you ever see propped up on two legs; but it's *fun* I live fer, an' without fun I'd dry up an' blow away wuss then ary old maid you—Thar he goes now!"

Ugly Dan started sharply, his sound left hand dropping on a revolver butt as the Howler uttered that ejaculation, and he glared around with eyes of fire, expecting to behold Iceberg Dave.

"Where, curse you, where?" he grated viciously. "The first drop tells the tale, and if I miss it through you, even Iceberg will be too slow to save your skull!"

"Not him—I meant that spunky critter as wanted to chaw up the tective fellers' count o' Perry Blair," hastily uttered Howling Jonathan.

"Frank Spartan?"

Jonathan nodded vigorously.

"He jest went in the saloon, yender, an' he looked like he meant holy business in a minnit! So-long, pard! thar's fun a-brewin' in thar, an' as it's the nighest, I'm howlin' right that course, I am!"

He dashed ahead, followed by Ugly Dan with scarcely less celerity, for the building indicated was no other than The Mint.

Even in his madness, Ugly Dan did not lose sight of his natural craftiness. He knew that if Iceberg Dave had shown up at his place of business, and Frank Spartan was to attempt a row, the cool sport would surely interfere to preserve order; and if this was so, he might be taken un-awares by his enemy.

The Howler was not deceived, though he had caught but a momentary glimpse of Frank Spartan as he entered The Mint.

The young man was still raging under the bitter charge flung in his teeth by Perry Blair, and knowing right well that he had plenty of enemies in Good Leather who would be only too happy to catch at even the shadow of a slur on his courage or manliness, he hastened at once to face it and them down or fight for his credit.

The instant silence which reigned among those who occupied the bar-room as he entered, told Frank plainer than words that he had formed the subject of conversation, and a dangerous light came into his eyes, as he spoke clearly, sharply:

"Gentlemen, I have just learned of the arrest of Perry Blair, with whom I had a little dispute this evening. I tried my best to get him set at liberty, but failed. Now, since I cannot settle my debt with him in person, I come to ask a favor of his friends. I'll fight any of them that cares to take his place, in their own style. I'll fight them one after another, until they are cleaned out or I am laid cold. I mean clean business, gentlemen, and you can't come to the front one second too quick to suit my taste!"

His jetty eyes roved swiftly over the startled faces before him, and just then he looked an awkward customer to handle, even for the best of tough men. Still there came no acceptance, and after a brief pause he spoke again:

"If the odds seem too great, gentlemen, make your own. I'll take two, three—the entire number, for that matter! I won't give his mates even the ghost of a chance to fling dirt when my back is turned. 'I'll prove my earnestness, if you'll but give me a chance! What! not even one friend to pick up the gauntlet? Poor Perry! At least, he was a man who knew no fear, and he deserved better and truer friends than those who fawned upon him while he was free-foot and hand-open!"

No answer, even now. There were dark and sullen faces to be seen among those lit up with broad smiles, and it was an easy task to pick out those who supported Frank Spartan from the ones who had trained under the colors of Perry Blair. But not one of the latter seemed inclined to take up the quarrel on behalf of their disgraced chief.

A short, mocking laugh parted the lips of Frank Spartan as he became fully convinced of this fact, and he cried as he moved toward the bar:

"It is *your* election, gentlemen, and if ever you hear a fool talking over this unfortunate affair, you can bear witness that I tried my level best to give Perry Blair a chance to even up through his friends. They declined the offer, and now—what 'll you take, gentlemen?"

There was no refusal to accept this sweeping invitation, even by those whom all present knew had been closest to and most intimate with Perry Blair. They knew that such a refusal would surely bring on a fight in which the friends of Frank Spartan would all the more gladly participate that he was present in person to lead them.

It was a curious spectacle, but one by no means uncommon in such wild and almost lawless sections.

The barkeeper was deftly slinging out the glasses when Ugly Dan slipped into the saloon, his left hand armed with a cocked revolver, his

black eyes filled with the glow of murder as they roved swiftly around in quest of the man who had shattered his good right hand with a bullet that afternoon. But Iceberg Dave was still absent, no one apparently knew where, and a savage curse broke from his thin lips as he realized that one more chance had slipped him by.

Of a verity the *habitués* of The Mint were not to grow rusty for lack of excitement and surprises, on this night!

"Not you, durn ye!" snarled Ugly Dan as the double ranks before the bar turned to break and scatter precipitately. "It's bigger game I'm huntin'. Where's Iceberg Dave?"

"Not in at present," promptly replied the barkeeper, his face pale as death, but his right hand going down below the bar and claspings about the butt of a revolver.

"Crawled into his hole to hide from a man!" cried Ugly Dan with a laugh that was even more savage than his curses. "Go on with your drinkin', gentlemen. I'm with you in spirit, but I've taken an oath to touch no liquor until I can drink it over the corpse of Iceberg Dave!"

"Jest a'p'int me your depity sponge ontel the circus is over with Dan'el, an' I'll go bail you'll be drunker'n a bilol owl afore two hours more!" chuckled the Terror, promptly "surrounding" his own dose and refilling the glass with a low bow toward the desperado. "Your drink, pard, an' my feel-um-good!"

Ugly Dan gave a surly growl as Howling Jonathan tossed off the liquor, and then spoke sharply, addressing the crowd in general:

"It's no more than fair I should tell you why I'm out gunning for Iceberg, gentlemen, and if you'll hold your hush for a bit, I'll do it."

He cast one more keen glance around him, into the gambling-room where only the two dealers remained at their stations, the players having flocked to hear what Frank Spartan had to say, then he strode to the corner of the room as formed by one end of the bar and the partition wall. With his back thus guarded, and the gathering all in his front, while it would be impossible for any one to enter the saloon without his catching the first glimpse, Ugly Dan added:

"You all know that neither Dave nor I have lost any sleep through our love for each other. I was satisfied to go my own way, as long as he didn't try to crowd me too hard. I knew he was a mighty good man at bottom, or I thought so until now! And thinking so, I was content to keep my own walk, only giving back such crow's as he chose to send over the line fence."

"But to-day Iceberg played me dirt of the nastiest description. You see this hand, gentlemen?" he cried, his voice taking on redoubled viciousness as he shook his bandaged right hand in the light where all could see. "Iceberg took a pot shot at me from under cover and behind my back this day, and when I have spare time, this hand will have to come off at the wrist—hell's bitterest curses forever blight the cowardly cur!"

There was a stir and a buzz perceptible and audible as the men interchanged swift glances at this bitter charge. Frank Spartan alone seemed unmoved, though such would hardly have been the case had he even suspected how that wound had been received—in whose defense it had been inflicted. But Amelia had said nothing of her experience at the hands of Ugly Dan, partly because the lovers had had no chance for close communion as yet, and partly because she knew Frank would lose no time in seeking the desperado to avenge her wrongs, and she loved him far too dearly to knowingly expose him to danger.

"He played me dirt, and when I was crippled, under his gun, my right hand useless, my left hand empty, he rubbed that dirt in until it came out on the other side! All this—and then he was fool enough to let me go, to get even! And even I'm going to get, or you'll have a chance to attend the funeral of a man!"

His voice choked with rage, and for a brief space there was silence throughout the room. Ugly Dan leaned back against the wall, his left hand clutching a revolver with muzzle covering the entrance. His face was purple and swollen with savage rage and hatred. His eyes were bloodshot and glowing like balls of living fire. His thin nostrils quivered as the hot breath came through them in sharp puffs.

Not a pleasant picture just then. Now, if never before, his title of Ugly Dan was fully justified by facts!

"That's my story, gentlemen," he said, his voice low and strained from the effort he made to control his furious passions sufficiently to speak at all. "You know why I'm out gunning for Iceberg Dave. And if there is one present who knows where the cowardly cur is hiding, I will give him fifty dollars to go and tell the dirty whelp I'm here and waiting for him! Will you go, Tom?"

He broke off with a snarl as a rapid footfall echoed just outside the door, and his pistol went up as a human form crossed the threshold, only to lower again with a vicious oath as he recognized his error. It was not Iceberg Dave, but the same ragged, wretched creature who had begged for a single glance at the face of Perry Blair not long before.

Tall, if standing erect, and of a figure that looked as though it might once have been athletic if not graceful, but now bowed and warped as though through disease or long and terrible sufferings. A head that was covered only with long, tangled hair, bleached by the sun and weather to a dull whitish hue. A face that was bearded, but not heavily enough to hide the wan cheeks, the pinched nose, the sunken eyes in which gleamed and glittered something that seemed close akin to insanity. Hands bony and claw-like, now raised to his head as the wretched creature stared about him like one dazzled and bewildered by the bright lights. A mass of tatters and rags for a garb, leaving his arms bare to the elbow and legs uncovered to the knees, while his bruised and scarred feet had no protection from the earth.

"I heard him!" gasped this wretched creature, his eyes roving over the curious, pitying or amused faces about him. "I heard the voice that mocked my agony in the ages gone by, when I was in hell! If I could only see his face! I would know that, I think! He printed it on my poor brain, and—was it you whose voice I heard but now?" and he paused as his glowing orbs reached the face of Frank Spartan.

"The man who spoke last is standing there," and the young man pointed toward Ugly Dan, who was scowling fiercely at this interruption.

With a swift movement the ragged creature stepped before the desperado, bending forward, shading his eyes with one bony hand, his gaze seeming to scorch the face they rested upon.

Ugly Dan growled viciously as he tried to beat back the strange being with his fiery gaze. But instead, the creature seemed fascinated by it, slowly moving nearer, his breath coming hot and fast, muttering:

"Speak—let me hear if the voice is the same! The dark face looks like that of the devil—speak, though only a word!"

"Curse you, get out of my light!" grated Ugly Dan as he swiftly raised one foot and kicked the stranger half-way across the room.

A cry of angry reproof broke from the crowd as they witnessed this brutality, but only Frank Spartan spoke in plain words:

"That was a coward act, Ugly Dan, and for it you should be booted all over Good Leather! Tackle a man of your own size, if—"

"Wait until I've laid out Iceberg Dave, and then blow, curse you!"

A wild, unearthly scream rent the air, and the ragged figure leaped forward, a bright blade flashing in his right hand. He landed fairly against the breast of Ugly Dan, and struck hard and sure!

"You devil! at last I've found you!" he snarled, savagely.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAN WITHOUT A BRAIN.

So swift the action, so fierce and deadly the onset, that not a hand could be lifted to check the maniacal slayer until all was over!

So swift the assault that Ugly Dan himself could not strike a blow in self-defense, the armed left hand with which he was threatening Frank Spartan being driven across his body as the strange being leaped at his throat, the revolver exploding and sending its lead crashing through the glittering pyramid of glasses piled on the shelf back of the bar.

So swift the blow that almost before one of those present could detect the gleaming of polished steel in the lamplight, the avenging blade had fallen, to rise again with red blood dimming its luster! Rose to fall for the second time. Again—and then Frank Spartan twisted the knife from the hand of the snarling, grating, foaming slayer, hurling it across the room with the same motion that pinned his arms and tore him from the sinking body of his victim.

And Ugly Dan, with never a word or groan, without a sign that told of life or consciousness, dropped in a limp and nerveless heap to the floor, his red heart's blood pouring out and forming a pool just where the slanting shadow of the bar drew a line across the corner.

The slayer never looked at the man whose strong arms held him helpless, never cast a glance around as a dangerous growl ran through the crowd, distinguishable even through the ejaculations of horror born of that swift tragedy. He glared at Ugly Dan with his eyes ablaze, and not a word came from his foaming lips until he saw the desperado fall to the floor without life or motion.

"The devil—the devil is dead! And I killed him, even as he murdered me in the long ago!" he cried, ending with a shrill, maniacal laugh that caused Frank Spartan, stout-hearted and steel-nerved though the young sport was, to shiver and feel his flesh creep!

"Plum' crazy, or I'm a howlin' liar right from headquarters!" came in a loud, clear tone from the Terror as he stepped a little nearer the assassin and his captor, facing the swaying, muttering crowd.

And then, in low tones that alone met the ear of Frank Spartan, so cunningly uttered that the closest observer could not have detected the motion of lips or throat, he hastily added:

"Ef you don't want him lynched off-hand,

boss, show your grit! Call your fri'nds to back us, or we're gone up in a holy minnit!"

Frank Spartan heard and comprehended, acting promptly. Those first words had so wholly expressed the thought—conviction, rather—that flashed across his own brain. This creature was surely insane, and if so, he should not be murdered without a trial.

With a swift movement he swung the slayer around and through the open archway leading into the gambling room proper, his left hand still grasping the mass of rags, his right filled with a revolver as he held it up with a warning gesture that checked in its birth the rush that would almost surely have ended in the death of the stranger.

"Don't be in a rush, gentlemen! The whole night's before us in which to settle this unfortunate affair. I'm open to hear reason, and I trust you all are in the same sweet state of mind. But whatever you do, don't crowd!"

Not so much the words or tones as the stern face and the dangerous light in those jetty orbs. They warned the excited crowd that any such crowding must be at their expense.

Before they could get at the slayer, they must first down this sport, unless they chose to break down the frail partition and so make room to act in too great for any one man to guard against. And almost before they could think of this method, the Howler stepped midway between, his back to Frank Spartan, his face to them, both hands armed and tight written in every line and feature, ringing out in every tone of his deep voice.

"Fer crowdin' is onperlite, gents, an' them's what I never could stan', nohow an' no ways! No crowdin', or they's goin' to be jest the holiest picnic right here that ever Good Leather seed in the hull course o' her pussional 'sperience—amen!"

The fierce, unreasoning lust for blood which so often finds birth in the sight of blood, was checked but not quenched. Dark and ugly looks; deep and savage growlings that might, at any moment, burst forth into a roar that would be stifled only in death; nervous hands gripping deadly weapons, waiting only for a leader—only for a movement that would break the peculiar spell which nearly always marks the first moments of such an uprising.

Swiftly the eyes of Frank Spartan roved over the faces before him. He showed no signs of fear or dismay, though he saw that even those on whose blind aid and backing he could usually count without asking, were to the full as much affected by that strange, unreasoning lust for blood as the most intimate friends and mates of the desperado who lay weltering in his blood at the end of the bar. And only now did he fully realize the difficulty of the task he had taken upon himself. But not a sign of all this appeared in his face or voice as he spoke up, clear and firm, but with the air of one who asks only a reasonable argument before coming to blows.

"Time enough and to spare, gentlemen, since you see I have taken charge of the man who killed Ugly Dan. He cannot escape if he was to make the attempt. I will be responsible for him, while you and I try to decide whether or no he was justified in the act."

"He killed Dan—kill him to make it even!" growled one of the mates of the slain desperado, a vicious-looking knife glittering in his grasp as he made a forward movement, only to recoil involuntarily, as it seemed, before the pistol of Jonathan, who indignantly cried:

"I like a hog, but you're a full slaughter-house full, you air! Ain't one cold corpus enough fer to make you a squar' meal? Want to decapitate all Good Leather in one night? Caint leave even a free lunch fer posterity? Billy-be-darned ef you ain't heap wuss than a John Pigtail at a rat barbecue—you be!"

If Howling Jonathan expected to make a point by raising a laugh at the other's expense, he was disappointed. The affair had passed that stage, and sterner arguments were needed to check the longing for blood.

Frank Spartan saw this, and though he still guarded the entrance to the gaming-room with unflinching nerve, his voice grew still more placable.

"I don't want to have trouble with you, gentlemen, but simply to get at the bottom facts. We can look at the matter soberly and come to some equitable decision surely!"

"Ain't it plain as the nose on your face, say?" indignantly added Hebrew, his red face turning still redder, his eyes flaming vividly as he articulated with his armed hands. "Didn't Ugly Dan lend him the loan o' his boot right whar he lived? An' fer why? Was the crazy critter trompin' onto any o' his pet corns? Was he doin' any harm? Not a durn bit, feller-citizens! Jest takin' a look at the sweet mug of him to try an' recognize a long lost brother! That's what! An' a kick—think of it, gents! A k-i-c-k, boot-leather!" and his whole form seemed to shrink and collapse with utter humiliation at having to utter the shameful words.

Only for a moment, then he drew his form erect, swelling out with hot indignation in voice, face and every member.

"A blow fer a kick! An' who's to stan' up in

the light whar his feller-critters kin see his dirty face an' say he wouldn't 'a' done the same thing or bu'st a 'spender tryin'? I want to see him step out afore the rest right here, an' say as much. An' then I want to go off an' die fer bein' in the same fashion as sech a whelp—I do fer a shameful fact, gentlemen!"

"Talk's cheap, but that won't bring Dan Bennisson back to life again!" muttered one of his friends.

"I had to do it—I had to kill him, even as he killed me, long years ago!" uttered that peculiar, shrill, yet not musical voice now that the insane frenzy had partially died out.

Frank Spartan had been watching the effect of the rude argument used by the Terror, until he spoke of looking for a long-lost brother. Then it seemed to him as though a wondrous revelation had burst upon his mental vision! And with pale, trembling, working features he turned to stare at the stranger.

He thrilled from head to foot as he looked, striving to realize what sort of face that might be were the matted hair cut away, the dirt and grime washed off, the cheeks filled out and the light of reason restored to those sunken eyes. And that thrill grew into a feeling but little short of awe as he fancied—was it only fancy?—he could trace there a likeness, faint, but still a likeness, to Amelia Moskau!

What if it should be so? What if this poor creature was indeed the long lost Franz Moskau? It was barely possible, and for the moment forgetting the danger which threatened more and more strongly with the passing of each instant, he bent forward and breathed the name of Franz Moskau in the ear of the wild-looking creature.

Only to step back with a sinking at his heart, for not a trace of emotion or of recognition came into those sunken eyes.

It was then that the slayer of Ugly Dan moved forward until he could look out upon the crowd that thirsted for his blood, and slowly, vacantly uttered those words.

Frank Spartan put out a hand to push him back, but then paused. It was a forlorn hope, but still, it might be of service. Surely even a mob would not lynch a lunatic!

"An eye for an eye—a life for a life!" uttered the stranger, seeming to waken under the savage glare fixed upon him by those who were crouching to leap at his throat. "He murdered me by inches! He tortured me for ages and ages, before he murdered me outright! He took out my poor, aching brain and filled my skull with mingled fire and ice! Did any of you ever have your brain taken from you by a cruel, merciless enemy? Do you know how unutterably horrible it is to feel that you are not like other men—to know that you are still living even while dead, long ago? Do you know what frightful agony it is to be doomed to wander through the wide world over until you find the devil—there he lies!" with a sudden intensity that sent a cold chill through many veins, as he pointed one trembling finger at the corpse lying on the floor.

Frank Spartan caught the maniac by the arm as he seemed on the point of leaping upon the desperado in which he seemed to recognize his destroyer.

"You hear, gentlemen?" he cried, his eyes glowing, his voice clear and ringing. "You know now why this poor creature killed Ugly Dan! You can see that his poor brain is unsettled by—"

"Gone!" moaned the madman, clasping his head with his claw-like fingers, uttering words written on his haggard features. "Lost! A man without a brain! Pity me, good people! Pity me and tell me where that devil hid my brain! See!" and despite the grip of the young man he dropped to his knees in the archway, clasping his hands, tears streaming from his sunken eyes. "I kneel to you, even as I used to kneel to the good God above before I was robbed of my brain! Tell me where I can find it and so die in peace! It is so hard to live on like this! I am so weary of my cruel sentence! Give me back my brain, and let me die!"

His voice died away in a choking sob. His head drooped, his hands crossing over his hollow chest, and hot tears dropped to the sanded floor, sparkling like gems in the lamplight.

His were not the only eyes that dimmed and filled with moisture, rarely seen when men are facing each other with deadly weapons drawn to take life.

His own sight dim and blurred, Frank Spartan felt that the worst was passed, that the poor creature was out of danger, so far as lynch law was concerned. But then a harsh, choking voice broke the silence:

"Too durned thin! That trick's saved its last murderer while I'm nigh enough to strike a lick fer a frind like Ugly Dan!"

Better for him and for his hopes of vengeance had he acted before speaking. His savage words put Jonathan on his guard, and as the fellow flung up his pistol-hand for a shot at the kneeling slayer, the Holy Terror leaped forward and knocked the weapon up just as it exploded, then grasped the fellow by hip and throat, heaving him into the air above his head, holding

him thus a moment before hurling him headlong through the open door, grating fiercely:

"Go an' tell 'em we're comin', you bloody cur!"

And almost before his actions could be realized, the red-haired cyclone leaped back to where he had dropped his pistols, snatching them up and facing the startled crowd with face inflamed, eyes aglow, voice full of stern resolution.

"That was a dirty cur, an' if I'd hed plenty o' time to waste, I reckon I'd 'a' disgraced my bringin' up by takin' off his mangy hide fer to p'izen coyotes with! But time I didn't hev, fer I want to reason with all the rest o' you bloody hounds that itch to murder a crazy man fer actin' the part of a white man! I want to see ye step out, one by one, or all in a heap together. I kin wipe the floor up with two dozen of the breed, an' take a nap while I'm doin' of it! I'm talkin' to the critters that want to hang a crazy man, mind ye, not to the decent part o' the crowd. Them I invite to step forward an' do themselves white by standin' by the right!"

Frank Spartan saw that this characteristic speech was not without its effect on a portion of the crowd, and quickly added:

"And I'm backing what Howling John says, gentlemen! You may be able to ride us both, but not without some tall bucking! And why should you try it? We don't ask that you wholly clear this poor devil of murder. We only ask that you give him a fair chance—that you let the matter rest until morning, when we will all be cooler-brained than we are at present. Then, if it be proven that he is not a lunatic, and so irresponsible for his actions, I will be the last man to stand between him and the punishment due his crime. But if you try to rush him into eternity without giving him a chance for his stake, I'll be too cold to take any further interest in the matter."

"Me, too!" chimed in the Howler, with a touch of his wonted humor. "An' ef you don't hev to send outside o' Good Leather fer hands enough to do the up-haulin' of that critter, then me an' my pard 'll lose our appetite heap sooner then we ever did afo' in a circus! An' it's Howlin' Jonathan Hebrew, the Terror from Headwaters that slings this bit of a sarmon at ye, honeys!"

"To you, my friends and old pards, I appeal," added Spartan, following up the charge without giving the other side a chance to make a counter-point. "You know me, and know that I try my level best to act white as I know how. You know that I would not defend an assassin; and, when I swear to you that I believe this poor devil is really crazy, and therefore not accountable for what he does, you will give me credit for honesty at least."

"Glory to the ram!" howled Jonathan, as several of the men stepped forward with empty hands at this appeal. "Step up to the mourners' bench, all ye who hope to be saved, fer in a minnit more I'm going fer to git in a weavin' way that I'll fresco these walls with gore an' brains an' tangled up ha'r tell you cain't rest fer the night-mar' it'll give ye!"

Frank Spartan frowned darkly, despite this acquisition to his allies, as he saw by far the greater portion of the crowd closing together as though for concerted action. He saw that those who had followed the lead of Perry Blair were uniting with the friends of Ugly Dan, and this told him an effort would almost surely be made to repay him for the stinging defiance with which he had so recently cowed them one and all.

Only for that wild hope born of the words uttered by the Terror in grim mockery, Frank Spartan would have greeted this fact with a certain degree of fierce satisfaction. The life he had led for months past made him just fit for a death-grapple where the odds were all against him. And if he could have known that this poor devil was not the long missing Franz Moskau, he would have made no further effort to stave off the collision which must come sooner or later.

But that hope, faint and chimerical though he could not help telling himself it was, gave him strength to smother the fierce temptation. He thought of the old blind man. He thought of Amelia, and thinking of her brought the memory of the vow she had made when he pressed her to marry him.

"Not while father lives, if Franz is dead. Not until we find him if living, or his grave if he is dead, as I sadly fear, my good friend! I love you, but my duty comes first. Bring me my poor brother, and then—it shall be as you will, my love!"

Those were her words, uttered brokenly and with tears that told how difficult she found it to give them utterance; but this very fact lent them double strength of purpose. She would never break that vow.

If this should prove to be the long-lost son and brother! If he could take him to them, even though his poor brain was shattered by the frightful sufferings which he must have undergone before he could have become such an utter wreck, would she not listen to him then? Would he not receive his reward for all he had done?

All this passed through his brain with wonder-

ful rapidity, and he warmly greeted the recruits to the good cause.

"I thank you, my friends," he hastily muttered, still watching the movements of the enemy, for now the lines which divided the crowd were being rapidly drawn plain and distinct, Howling Jonathan enthusiastically welcoming each fresh "mourner" as they came forward. "It is not a murderer I ask you to aid me in defending, but a poor madman who has but taken a just and holy vengeance on a merciless devil! Look at him, all of you!" he cried with thrilling ardor, as he lifted the poor wreck to his feet and held him facing those scowling faces.

"Is that the face—are those the eyes of sober reason? Are not they signs of long and horrible torture? Ay! I tell you to your teeth, you men who stand up for yonder lump of carrion! I tell you that he richly deserved his fate, even though it had been a thousand-fold more bitter! I say that this poor wretch was fully justified in killing him as he did! Now make the most of that, you bulldogs!"

"I had to kill him!" mechanically repeated the stranger. "He took away my brain and cursed me to wander the wide world over without rest until I could discover the place where he hid it. It was cruel—so cruel! May you never suffer as that devil doomed me to suffer! May you never know what frightful agony it is to be a man without a brain! To cry and pray aloud for death to come to you as the sweetest boon mortal man can receive! To only one devil in human shape would I decree such a monstrous doom—and he is dead! I killed him! But I had to do it! I had to do it!"

His voice sunk away into an incoherent whisper, his sunken eyes resting on the body lying there in its gore. He could see nothing else, and if any further proof was wanted as to his insanity, it might have been found in the fact that never once did he notice the threatening attitude of his enemies, never once show fear or interest in their ugly mutterings, their growing threats.

The Howler had listened intently to this wild speech, his gray eyes keenly riveted on the face of the stranger, and now he turned once more toward the opposing party, his voice hard and resolute, though his words were couched in his peculiar phraseology.

"You hear what the critter says, gents, an' ef you ain't clean blind idjits, you know that he's crazier then a bed-bug in a deserted cabin. But I ain't keerin' a copper dam! I ain't crazy myself, but ef you're dead sot on lynchin' a crazy critter, I'll play I was the best I kin."

"I take all the 'sponsibility onto my own self fer what that pore critter done. Ef he hedn't wiped that blot off o' the face of the airth, I'd 'a' done it myself. That makes me jest as guilty as you take him to be. An' I'm your mutton—with wool a yard long and horns fit to blow down the walls o' Jericho! Come an' see me! Do come, durn ye!"

Frank Spartan stepped forward and tapped the cowering Terror on the shoulder, saying sharply:

"While we will fight if we can't get along without it, we are not begging a row, my friend. Save your breath to back your licks when the crowding comes, if come it does."

Jonathan laughed a little sheepishly, as he responded:

"I jert wanted to get 'em piled onto me, boss, so's you could 'ashay right out o' the door to a safe spot—you know whar!"

"We are going out, all the same," and at a gesture of his hand his friends closed around the madman, two men holding fast to his arms, the remainder with weapons drawn and faces telling plainer than open words how firmly they intended to carry out their orders.

Frank Spartan glanced keenly at the enemy, then said coldly:

"You heard my words, but that there may be no excuse for a misunderstanding, I repeat them. We are going out of that door, peaceably if we can, but going out! If we find the way clear, so much the better; if not, then we'll eat a road through or die making our teeth meet in the flesh! Now you've got it, straight as a string! Ready, lads! don't shoot unless you have to, but then shoot to kill!"

"Who talks about shooting in my place?" cried a cold, stern voice.

CHAPTER XIV.

SCORE ONE FOR ICEBERG DAVE.

ACROSS the threshold of The Mint stepped Iceberg Dave, pausing and glancing from one party to the other, as though to read the actual facts of the case in their faces.

His hands hung easily at his sides, empty of weapons, nor were any such visible to the eye, though all who knew the cool sport of Good Leather at all, knew that when the occasion for arms arose, the proprietor of The Mint would be amply supplied from some source.

"Who talks of shooting in my place?" he again demanded, his tones even and smooth, but plainly meaning business of the strictest sort. "I do the shooting for this establishment, I want you to understand."

Not the faintest show of angry bluster. The tones smooth and easy, though so clear-cut and distinct. The white face calm and immobile as

though its owner was uttering the merest commonplace in the midst of his dearest friends, instead of facing nearly two-score hot-headed men, who had weapons drawn and their evil passions wrought up to fever-heat.

Only in those big gray eyes could be seen anything like menace. A yellowish light was shining there, and those who knew this icy sport the best, felt an uneasy thrill as they beheld that rising signal-light.

"That cussed critter killed Ugly Dan!" growled one of the dead desperado's friends, shaking a grimy fist toward the stranger.

"It was blow for blow, and Bennison struck first," as promptly cried Frank Spartan. "But all we're standing up for is a fair trial, as against mob rule. If our man is proved guilty by responsible parties after a fair hearing, we'll be the last to stand between him and punishment."

"But you can't railroad him over the range 'thout a show, unless you buck this hull rijiment off o' the track—an' I wouldn't give a pinch o' last year's frost fer your ole cowcatcher when the job's jobbed, nuther! It won't play pilot never no more, it won't!" added the Howler with an emphatic nod, by way of emphasis.

Swiftly those big gray eyes roved from face to face as each man spoke, then passed on until they rested on the prostrate figure lying in a pool of dark blood, in the angle formed by the partition and the bar. The yellow light deepened to red, as though it caught a reflection from the pool of blood. The thin lips parted enough to show a line of white below the drooping mustaches. But in nothing else did Iceberg Dave betray emotion, though into his hands there somehow came a brace of revolvers, grim and business-like, as he spoke coldly:

"Keep your places, gentlemen, or somebody's going to get hurt. You all know what laws govern The Mint. One of those laws has been broken, and I'm going to get at the bottom facts of the case before a soul of you all stir a foot front or back. You know me, I reckon!"

He strode forward and bent over the dead man, paying no attention to the angry men whom he had so boldly bearded, even threatened. And it is probable that to this very careless contempt Iceberg Dave owed his immunity so long. His cold contempt of danger rendered him almost death-proof.

Only a few moments were spent in the examination, but they were quite sufficient to satisfy the experienced sport that Ugly Dan was indeed dead. The avenging blade had literally cleft his heart in twain. And cold, calm as ever, he rose erect, turning toward the man behind the bar, saying:

"You must have seen the whole affair, Harry. How did it begin, and who deserves the blame?"

Briefly, but with sufficient clearness, Headlight Harry described the event, and none who listened to him could say that he showed partiality to either side.

"It was a blow for a kick," interposed Frank Spartan, as the barkeeper concluded, "but we don't hold altogether by that, ample cause though it was. This poor fellow is crazy as a loon, and it would be rank murder to hold him accountable for what he has done."

"Crazy be durned!" came with a savage snarl from the opposing party. "What bloody murderer ain't crazy, ef you take the say-so of his friends? Ugly Dan was white, clean through, an'—"

"Will you stick a pin right there, Creaker?" coldly interposed Iceberg Dave, emphasizing his request by a rapid shifting of his revolver muzzle. "Ugly Dan was clean white. He's deepest part never contained a blacker, vider, more utterly despicable wretch than this some-angel of light—ac-cording to your gospel!"

For the first time since his appearance on the scene of trouble, Iceberg Dave showed outward signs of heat, of anger and excitement. And though the lips of the growling mate of the dead desperado parted to utter a retort, he thought better of it when he saw that white face show twin spots of red on the cheeks. He shrunk back, trembling, though ordinarily a bold fellow enough.

"It isn't often I speak hard words of the dead, even when those words are truth boiled down," added the sport, his voice suddenly resuming its wonted calmness, though the danger signals still glowed in his eyes and on his cheeks. "But I've got to do so now, in justice to myself, for right well I know that after what has happened this day, yonder carrion would never have come here unless on the war-path."

"He swore you crippled him—shot him from behind!"

"And so I did," was the cool admission that caused a murmur of wonder to break from the law-and-order party, a deeper, more significant growl from those who opposed them. "And I'll tell you why I fired that shot. When I have done so, if Ugly Dan has any friends present who think he didn't get off with far less punishment than he deserved, I'll give them a chance to get even on his account."

"He and two other dirty whelps were making sport of a poor, weak, aged blind man, and abusing his young daughter—a lady, if ever there was one come to Good Leather!"

A sharp cry escaped from the lips of Frank Spartan, and he took a step forward, his face white and hard, his jetty eyes flaming, but paused as Iceberg Dave raised his free hand with a commanding gesture.

"The young lady met no injury, pard, thanks to Mrs. Watkins, who fortunately chanced to be riding out that way. She heard screams, and caught the drop on the dirty cur. She held it, too, though Ugly Dan managed to cover her with his gun, while holding the girl as a safeguard for his worthless carcass. The widow vowed she would shoot him if he didn't clear out before she could count ten. He swore he'd drop her from the saddle as her lips formed the word nine. He meant it, too; but even his ugly face and dirty threats couldn't frighten the little woman who is an honor and an ornament to Good Leather!"

"Be durned ef she ain't, now!" enthusiastically cried Jonathan, casting a vengeful glare toward the corpse. "An' I'm only wishin' we had a 'lectric battery right here so's we mought bring that low-down critter to life ag'in long enough fer each one o' this outfit to lend him a punch right—be durned ef it don't make me gag up my boots, jest to think! The widder! that little angel with the fiddle-squeezer! He—Ugly Dan—good Lawd!"

Utterly unable to do justice to the subject, Jonathan tore off his dilapidated felt hat and flung it to the floor, lifting his foot as though to stamp it through the planks, only to pause abruptly, shaking his head in supreme disgust as he muttered:

"Tromple the old louse-cage—fer sech as him? Be durned ef it wouldn't be too much honor fer the likes o' him, so it would!"

Iceberg Dave bore with this interruption calmly enough. He knew his hearers, and knew that just such touches of nature as this went a long way with them.

"I chanced to come up just at this juncture, and I sent a blue pill through the cur's paw. I could have downed him for good just as easily, but I wanted to make him chaw dirt as far as I could. And he did it, too, big fighting man and mighty chief as Ugly Dan claimed to be! I made him get down on his knees and beg pardon of both ladies. I turned him loose, to go his way, for the time being; but I meant to look him up and put him beyond the power of insulting ladies for the future. For that reason I am sorry he has met his fate, and for that reason alone."

Frank Spartan stepped forward and grasped his hand with warmth.

"I thank you, Dave, for what you have done. Miss Moskau is my promised wife, and a favor done to her is a favor done to me. Be sure I'll not forget it very soon!"

"You owe me nothing, Mr. Spartan," was the cold, almost rude reply, and there was no answering pressure, no friendliness in those gray eyes. "I simply performed my duty then, just as I am going to do my duty now. That was to ladies in distress, this is a duty I owe myself and the house I have sworn to run on white principles. You can't fight in here. Decide your quarrels after your own fashion, but do it outside. I swear to put daylight through the first man who fires a shot or strikes a blow this side the threshold yonder!"

Frank Spartan uttered a light laugh as he stepped back and joined his little party, feeling far more confident now than he had a few minutes before. Even as a neutral, Iceberg Dave was a power in the land.

Jonathan stepped forward, grasping the cool sport's hand before it could be guarded, crying enthusiastically:

"White as they make 'em, pard! an' be durned ef I ain't bloody the ear o' the man at last to say you ain't a chief 'mong chiefs! That's the sort o' kittens I'm lookin' fer, an' when we git this little tangle sorter straightened out, I'm comin' back to make ye a call, fer pure fun or many ducats, to see which is the high-muck-a-muck o' Good Leather from this time on! Be durned ef I ain't now!"

"You'll find me at home, I reckon," was the cold retort as Iceberg Dave shook off the warm grip, adding:

"And now, gentlemen, if you will be so kind and accommodate us to take a little walk with that crazy fellow of yours, I'll try and see the rest of the company don't disturb you as you pass them by."

Frank Spartan led the way, and his friends followed, with the madman in their midst. Not a hand was raised to check them, though many were the sullen, vicious looks cast at them by the enemy.

Howling Jonathan was the last to pass the door, and turning he said:

"Ef I was you, gents, I don't reckon I'd be in any too big a hurry 'bout follerin' this crowd up. I'm gittin' powerful stiff in the jints with rheumatism, an' it makes me tired to be crowded. So durned tired that jest as like as not I'd hev to ax ye to tote part o' my load—say a couple dozen or two o' blue whistlers! So-long!"

He backed out into the night, keeping a few yards to the rear of the escort, hand on pistol, eyes watching the door of The Mint. But the

enemy showed no haste in following, either owing to the arguments of Iceberg Dave, or the parting hint conveyed by Howling Jonathan.

Frank Spartan led the way direct for the shanty in which Perry Blair was confined, feeling almost certain that he would yet have to do battle with the friends of Ugly Dan and the gambler before day dawned. And he had seen enough of the detective and his aids to know that they would be prime allies in a fight.

The Howler, as they passed out of sight of The Mint without any signs of pursuit, hastened his footsteps and gained the side of Frank Spartan, hurriedly uttering:

"I reckon you ketched my hint, pard, when I said the quicker you got the pore critter to a safe spot the better?"

"You meant the house where Perry Blair is confined?"

"Fer sure! An' I reckon it won't do no hurt fer me to mosey on ahead fer to explainify a bit, or them 'tective critters mought take us fer a gang come to bounce 'em 'count o' Blair."

"You are a friend of theirs, then?" pointedly asked Spartan.

"Friend o' the law, ruther, pard," laughed Jonathan, pressing on at a rapid pace that quickly carried him out of sight in the shadows.

To give the Holy Terror ample time to pave the way, and seeing no signs of pursuit, Frank Spartan moderated his pace, and when the party came in sight of the stone house, they caught sight of the Howler hastening toward them, waving his right hand. Taking it for a signal to halt, they did so, but the red-headed cyclone laughed as he came up.

"It's right as right can be, pard. Them 'tective fellers is white as human critters gen'ally git to be, an' they says they'll not only lend ye the loan of a bunk fer Ugly Dan's layer-out, but they'll agree to swap fightin' with ye ef trouble hes to come on either 'count. How does that strike ye, pards?"

"It's a little one-sided, but we're not going to split straws," laughed Spartan shortly.

"The first object is to get this poor fellow under cover. After that, we'll do our part. Eh, mates?"

There was a prompt and cheerful response. Men who would shirk a fight would hardly have ventured to espouse a cause so hopeless as this one had looked at first.

"Ef it only comes—which is what's troublin' me heap sight the wu'st jest now!" grinned the Holy Terror, smacking his lips loudly as he led the way on to the extemporized prison.

They were met a few paces from the entrance by the tall detective, who asked a few questions as to what had happened, then keenly scrutinized the man without a brain.

"I am satisfied, Mr. Spartan," he finally uttered, quietly. "Come with me, and I'll let you inside with your friend."

"That is what I most desire," hastily uttered Frank, his voice a trifle unsteady as he recurred to those wild, incredible fancies which had flashed across his brain when he first noticed the face of this nameless man. "I believe he is one for whom I have been searching a long time, and if I could be alone with him where there was a light, I think I might learn the truth!"

The detective was unlocking the door while Frank was speaking, and now flung it open. There was a single lantern inside, lighting up the one rude chamber indistinctly.

At the further end of the room Perry Blair was sitting on the floor, his back supported by the wall. Irons were upon his wrists, and strong thongs bound his ankles together. Near him, half-lying on a blanket spread on the ground floor, was a guard, revolver in hand.

Evidently the detectives meant to run no chances!

His eyes better used to the dim light, Perry Blair was the first to recognize Frank Spartan, and a savage curse burst from his lips. He lifted his manacled hands and shook them until the short links rattled again. His face was that of a demon as he burst out:

"Come you, coward—cur! Come to gleat over your dirty victory, I suppose! Bah! I wouldn't change places with you for all the gold in America to boot! Afraid to meet a man—afraid to stand up for the blow you dealt when I wasn't expectin' anything of the kind! To save your cowardly hide, you trumped up this dirty trick! But it won't save you, even though you add my murder to the list! The boys will see that the true story is spread broadcast! They will—"

His rage and hatred were too intense to permit his lips to form another coherent sentence, and he went off into a stream of curses and black-guardism so horrible that the tall detective leaped upon him and forced a gag between his jaws. Even then the wretch kept cursing with glowing eyes!

"To keep him quiet, if not for the good of your ears, Mr. Spartan," said the detective when this work was accomplished to his satisfaction. "Of course he knows his vile charges are utterly without foundation, just as well as we do, but somehow he seems to hold a particular grudge against you for some reason."

"Which I neither know nor care to discover," was the cold response. "You have satisfied

me that you are acting under the law, and that cancels any claim I might have on the dog. And now, can I have a few minutes alone with this poor fellow?"

The bland smile vanished and the thin face hardened, though the voice of the detective was polite enough as he made reply:

"It is against our instructions to lose sight of our game for an instant after it is fairly brought to bag. You need not fear to speak out before Jones. He can be both blind and deaf on occasion."

Frank Spartan knew that it would be useless to argue a decision given with that face and in that tone, so he bowed coldly, and gently led the man without a brain to the corner furthest removed from the prisoner and his guard. He induced him to sit down on the floor, if such it could be called, since it was no more than the bare earth, then passed over and borrowed the lantern.

He held this so that the rays fell fairly across the face of the unfortunate being, gazing at him keenly, striving to again trace the resemblance which he had seen while in The Mint. Inch by inch, feature by feature, trying to see them as they might look with the hair shaven off and the skin cleansed of dirt and grime. And the faint hope grew more strong—the dim conviction became almost a certainty!

Surely this was the original of the photograph over which he had pored for hours at a time, impressing every line, every feature indelibly upon his brain! Surely this was the long-lost Franz Moskau!

Returning the lantern, he came back and sat down beside the unfortunate man, taking his hand in his own, trying to fix his wandering gaze, speaking in slow, clear tones, choosing the words which he felt would be the surest to awaken the memory of the past.

He spoke of the old home, pictures of which Amelia had often drawn for him in their hours of communion after the weary work and tramping of the long days were done, telling him every little detail until he could close his eyes and see it start up before him—as it was before Franz went away, before the mother died, before they were crushed to the earth by trouble and heart-pain.

But not a sign came into that blank, wan face or vacant eyes to give him encouragement!

He spoke of the blind minstrel, and of Amelia, his sister. He told of their pathetic hopes, of their weary wanderings in search of their missing dear one. But in this, too, he was doomed to suffer keenest disappointment. At times the unfortunate man would look at him with a vague curiosity, only to turn his wild eyes away with a low murmur about his missing brain, about the devil who killed him by stealing it away, condemning him to wander over the earth a corpse, yet unable to lie down in a grave where he might find rest and peace.

All his efforts were in vain, and finally Frank Spartan was forced to relinquish his efforts, though still clinging to the one frail hope which he had so often heard fall from the lips of Herman Moskau—music might restore his reason.

For by this time Frank Spartan was firmly convinced that he had indeed discovered the long missing Franz Moskau!

Begging the detective on guard to keep an eye on the unfortunate fellow, and enforcing this with a handful of gold, Frank rapped on the door and was permitted to emerge just in time to see Howling Jonathan come running up to the party, a broad grin on his face and running over in his voice as he panted:

"Ef the pot ain't beginnin' to boil up like fun, then I don't want a red cent! Good Lawd! but the critters is chawin' soap an' chompin' their teeth wuss than two bears with a stout fence 'tween 'em!"

"What have you discovered?" sharply demanded the tall detective, who appeared to be the head of the party.

"Nough to set my old boots to dancin' a jig of the weight of my trotters didn't hold 'em down too tight!" chuckled Howling Jonathan.

"Business, if you please, sir!" sharply chided the detective. "This is no time for folly. If danger is brewing, the sooner we know it the better. Plain talk, and no exaggeration, mind."

With a visible effort Howling Jonathan sobered down and tersely narrated what discoveries he had made on his brief scout. They were quite enough to bring hard, thoughtful looks into the faces of all present, save himself. Even while his face was sober enough, his eyes danced and sparkled as though he could conceive nothing better or more to be welcomed than a fight to the death with the lynchers!

"Be course I didn't put myself too much forward," he added, with a grim humor that was readily understood if not fully appreciated by those who listened to this report. "That moughtn't 'a' bin good medicine fer our side, ye mind! But I seed an' hearn a-plenty fer to be on the safe side o' the fence in tellin' ye that Good Leather is glittin' up on her ear like a mace! It's a sort o' double-bar'led a'fair, ye see. One gang's dead sot fer lynchin' the crazy

critter fer downin' Ugly Dan, while the other is just red-hot to set Perry Blair free an' cury-comb you fellers all over fer pickin' him up so mighty neat."

"They are acting in concert then?"

"I should remark! Concert with a hull brass band to it, now I tell ye, boss!" enthusiastically cried Howling Jonathan. "Won't be no lack o' music when the curtain once rolls up, fer sure! An' this outfit hes got to do some mighty tall dancin' ef it don't want to get left 'way behind the chune, too, I'm tellin' ye, honeys!"

"Are they divided, or are they going to act as one gang?" repeated the detective, changing his mode of expression for one better suited to the one addressed.

"One gang fer sart'in," was the prompt reply. "Nigh as I could make out, they was some fifty in the outfit when I seed 'em, an' ef I ain't wide mistook, they're waitin' fer more to come in. Oh, they'll be a-plenty fer to go 'round, don't you fret, pard! Won't be no need o' any o' this crowd goin' hungry fer lack o' good, tough chawin'—no, sir!"

CHAPTER XV.

ICEBERG DAVE MAKES HIS REPORT.

THERE was no answer made to the blunt hint which Howling Jonathan made on the threshold of The Mint. Those to whom it was more particularly addressed, just then had eyes and ears only for Good Leather's cool sport.

Iceberg Dave held them under a spell, as it were, and while he chose to hold them thus, they were little more than mute and jointless puppets, subject wholly to his will.

He would have been more or less than man had he not felt a certain degree of pleasure in this exhibition of his peculiar power, but not a sign of such appeared in his white, cold face. Sternly erect he stood before the cowed men, pistols in hand, his big gray eyes roving swiftly from face to face as though watching for the first symptom of rebellion. But none such were to be seen. The cold, white-faced sport was too thoroughly understood for that, and though they must have known that a single concerted movement would have put him beyond the power of interfering again, they also knew that death would surely be the portion of those who made the first move against him.

As though to fully prove his power, Iceberg Dave held them thus for fully one minute before he spoke again, and even then his words were such that the party did not care to take the risk of breaking away without hearing him through.

"As I spoke plainly to that gang, gentlemen, so I'll give you words with the bark on, and straight as though you found them inside the Bible. If any of them scratch too deep for comfort, lay it to your mistake in trying to turn The Mint into a bear-garden. Outside, I have nothing to say. You might fight from now until the crack of doom, for all I care. But in these four walls my word is law, and I'm judge, jury, sheriff, and executioner, all combined!"

"Was we to stan' by an' see Ugly downed like that, with never a word or look, even?" growled Jack Croaker.

"The less you say about Daniel Bennison to me, my dear fellow, the more apt you will be to live long enough to see him safely planted," Iceberg Dave softly retorted, showing his white teeth in a smile that was even more to be avoided than the blackest scowl, when coming from a man of his nature. "I had important business that kept me occupied until a bit ago, or that crazy fellow would never have been quick enough to down Ugly Dan. I counted him my meat, for insulting a lady whom all Good Leather is proud to honor, love and respect."

"Ugly Dan led the life of a brute, and I am glad he died the death of a dog, my only regret being that another hand than mine sent him to the devil his master. But I'll take the responsibility, anyway. And if Ugly Dan's friends want to avenge his death you can send them to me for final settlement. Is that sufficiently clear, gentlemen?"

"It's that cuss who played crazy we want, not a white man like you be, Iceberg," sullenly muttered Croaker.

"Well, you can go and take him, for all I care," was the cool reply. "After you cross my threshold, I have no further jurisdiction. You can lynch half of Good Leather for aught I care; be sure I'll never lift a finger to hinder you from stretching the neck of that crazy fool, or even Frank Spartan, for that matter."

The dark, sullen faces began to lighten up, and there was a faint show of raising a cheer to reward the magnanimous owner of The Mint, but Iceberg Dave squelched this with a single motion of his armed hand.

"Get down to solid business just as soon as best pleases you, gentlemen, but don't cut in ahead of the hearse. Croaker, The Mint has no further use for a stiff of Ugly Dan's dimensions. You and his other pards want to tote him out of this, first off, or he may meet with less considerate treatment. You sabs?"

In silence the burly ruffian and his chosen mates picked up the ghastly burden and bore it out into the night. Iceberg Dave watched them

coldly until the body was lost to view, then he turned and entered the gambling-room, a slight signal summoning the barkeeper and the faro-dealers to his side.

In low, guarded tones he whispered to them for a few moments, then turned again to the saloon, where only a few members of the former crowd remained. In cold, measured tones he spoke to them:

"As the pure white article for us all, gentlemen, it is only fair that I tell you I have given my boys strict orders to mark down the name of every man who cuts up rusty in The Mint to-night. I've got a little business on hand which must be promptly attended to, but when I have gotten that off my hands, I'm coming back to glance over the list the boys make. And I'll pay it off, if my sand holds out long enough."

That was all, but it was ample. All who heard him knew that any one who engaged in another row at the saloon that night would have to make ample amends or else rub Iceberg Dave out slick and clean!

Apparently David had nothing to conceal, or else felt perfectly secure against being followed through curiosity as to what important business he could have on hand for that evening, for he strode direct to My House, entering the bar and office combined, asking for Colonel Joel Mallison: was he within?

"Up in his room, ef he hain't gone out without my seein' of him," was the prompt response of the tough-looking lad-of-all-work, before the barkeeper could speak.

"He always leaves the key to his room with me, when he goes out, and as he hasn't done so this evening, I reckon you'll find him up in his room, Dave," added the barkeeper. "Shall I send up—"

"Never mind—I know my way, and won't trouble you," smiled the cool sport as he turned and left the room by a door opening into the narrow passage which also contained the flight of stairs leading to the second story.

As he emerged from the office, he caught sight of widow Mercy Watkins standing at the door of the back parlor, one finger on her lips as though warning him to silence and caution, then beckoning to him. He instantly glided toward her, following her into the room in which we last saw her with Frank Spartan.

"I heard you asking for the colonel?" she whispered, guardedly.

"Yes, but he can wait," was the quick reply, the big gray eyes beginning to glow and kindle as they had once before that day.

There was what seemed a reflected glow in her brown eyes, but before Iceberg Dave could assure himself of this, the long lashes drooped and she spoke softly:

"I wish to ask a very particular favor of you, Mr. Ingram—"

"It is granted beforehand," was the quick interjection. "My time, hand, life—all are at your service, Mercy!"

"After you have seen the colonel—"

"The colonel be—blessed!" and there was far more than the usual amount of animation in the voice and looks of Good Leather's cool sport, just then, as his white hands caught her plump little paw between them.

"No; see him and finish your business with him, then I will explain my wants, David," with a warm smile and a sparkle of the brown eyes.

"And I will find you here?"

"Unless I find you," with a light laugh, as she freed her hand and led the way to the door, opening it to afford him egress, but after such a fashion that no one who might chance to be in the passage could catch even a glimpse of her, though this proved an unnecessary caution.

Iceberg Dave ran lightly up the steep steps and knocked quickly at the door of Colonel Joel Mallison's room, and when a surly voice bade him enter, it was the cold, grave, steel-nerved sport whom Good Leather held up as a model of "sand" and "git thar" that entered the chamber and closed the door softly behind him.

Just as we have seen him once before on this same eventful eve, Colonel Joel Mallison was sitting at the little round table, with brandy and cigars close at hand. The room was blue with smoke, and from the unusually flushed face as well as the thick voice that greeted David Ingram, it was clear enough that the colonel had not spared these comforts.

"Sit down. You've kept me waiting long enough, the devil knows!"

Iceberg Dave drew a chair to the opposite side of the table, leaning his elbows upon it as he stared with his big gray eyes direct into the bloodshot blue ones of the other. His face was cold and hard-set, though his thin lips curled a trifle. His voice was harder still as he spoke:

"I have been at work. And you? Swilling bad liquor like a hog up to its eyes in swill! Muddling your never too clear wits. Unsteady—ing what few nerves you could boast of at the best, just when you ought to be preparing yourself for hard and bitter and merciless fighting! Of the two, Mallison, I reckon I've got the whitest record!"

The colonel stared open-mouthed at his visitor, his wits too much befogged to keep pace with those cold, scornful sentences, though they were

uttered deliberately rather than hotly or in haste. But the sting rankled at last, and a fiery oath leaped to his thick lips.

"What the foul fiend are you jumping rough-shod on me for?"

"Because less summary methods would have no effect upon you as you are now," was the icy retort, those gray orbs glowing with mingled reproof and scorn. "Because I find you making a hog of yourself just when you should be clearing your wits for hot and deadly work! Because I am growing sick and tired of racking my brains to keep your head above water, while you persist in ruining all with your infernal bull-headed obstinacy! Because you will hunt your hole at the first sign of danger, laying low, playing the hog and cur while the rest of us are out fighting to correct the mistakes you have made! And if those are not reasons enough, I can pile one on another until it would take a thousand-power telescope to see half-way to the top of them!"

"Are you going crazy, Dave Ingram?" spluttered the magnate of Good Leather, turning a sickly yellow as he shrunk back from those icily gleaming orbs.

A low, soft laugh parted the lips of the cool sport, and there was no trace of scorn or reproof in the words that followed:

"Not a bit of it, my dear fellow. Simply trying to open a hole through the whisky-fog, and to save precious time by opening your eyes at once, instead of trusting to the slow effects of cold argument. I've got most important matters to report, and for your own good, as for the welfare of all the others, you must give it immediate and careful attention. You follow me?"

"You talk as though I was no better than a half-wit!" sulkily growled the colonel, his hand moving toward the decanter, only to be pushed back by that of the cool sport.

Sharp and cold came the retort:

"And how much better have you shown yourself? What wit have you displayed since the stage came in this day?"

Colonel Mallison shrunk back, his eyes drooping, that yellowish hue again coming back to his face, his voice trembling despite the evident effort he made to render it steady.

"That devil! It seemed as though he put a spell on me! And coming so soon after—after a heavy shock that—"

A low, cold laugh from the gambler cut him short.

"If you call that a heavy shock, I wonder how you'll manage to weigh the one that is now impending over your head?"

"What do you mean? What shock?" gasped the colonel, uneasily.

Iceberg Dave flung out one hand carelessly, responding:

"That must take its turn. You forget that I have a report to make to you as the nominal head of the family. Are you ready to receive it? Can you muster up your wits sufficiently to comprehend what I say?"

Good Leather would have opened its eyes widely could it have seen those two men just then, and listened to the scornful tones in which Iceberg Dave addressed the magnate. Colonel Joel Mallison had fallen down one step in its estimation that day; this would have brought him to the very foot of the flight.

"Try me and see," sullenly muttered the colonel.

Once more Iceberg Dave made a complete change in his manner and tones, the one calm and easy, the other respectful, as due a superior in rank, if not in ability.

"You know what news we expected to receive by the stage; very different from what actually came. And the worst of it is that what we heard was the actual truth!"

"I knew it!" muttered Mallison, moodily. "As soon as I caught the eyes of that red-headed demon, I knew we were ruined!"

"If we are, I know who is to shoulder the biggest share of the blame," and Iceberg Dave reached across the table to touch the arm of the speculator. "You lost your nerve just when it was needed the most. You let that rascal—if he is the man we have to fear, which I am strongly inclined to doubt—see your hand, just when you wanted to play every card for all they were worth! It would not take very hard talking to make a jury bring that in as rank treachery, colonel!"

"I was all broken up!" muttered the other, moodily, with a longing glance toward the liquor which Iceberg Dave was guarding. "You don't know why, but it was no actual fault of my own. And then, if you say he isn't the devil we were looking for, what harm could it do?"

"I said I hardly believed he could be the man," coldly corrected the gambler. "But let that point pass for the present. To my report."

"I left town as soon as I could manage it without being noticed, and hastened to the rendezvous. I found the boys there, save two whom that red-haired rascal laid out cold. They had been left behind, hidden as thoroughly as time would admit. Captain Clean-up was not with the gang, having left in a hurry

for town, that his agency or identity might not be suspected."

"I thought somebody said he was killed?"

"If so, there was some excuse for it," was the quiet response. "He was shot and knocked from the saddle, I believe. The bullet struck and shivered the bone handle of his bowie-knife, which happened to be resting directly over his heart. The shock upset him for a few minutes, but an examination showed that the lead had gone no further, and that the blood came only from bits of the bone tearing his skin. It was lucky for him—it might have been far luckier if he had carried no knife other than the plain one in his belt!"

Colonel Mallison stared at the speaker with wide open eyes. This sounded like open treachery to one of the family!

"I don't understand you!" he muttered, one trembling hand rubbing his brandy-beated forehead.

"You will in good time," was the cold retort. "Just now—listen:"

"When I found Captain Clean-up was missing, I picked out one of the coolest headed members, and pressed him close with questions, resolved to get at the bottom facts and to discover where the blame for the botched affair should be placed."

"To go back to the beginning, he said that word was received under the usual cover, that plans were being laid for the capture or destruction of the road-agent gang under Captain Clean-up. The information was far from clear on some points, but in the main it was quite sufficient to give us a living chance to win the game."

"Just what force was to be sent our spy could not say. Equally in the dark was he as to the name and description of the chief enemy, but he knew when the hunt was to begin, and sent facts by which Captain Clean-up felt positive to-day's stage would bring the devil to Good Leather. And so, to at one blow upset the dirty scheme, he resolved to stop the stage and find out the bloodhound. With him in custody, it would go hard but torture would bring out the whole truth."

"You know what happened. The hearse was held up in good style, and as only Joe Duncan and a rough cuss was on the box, one of whom he knew to be faithful and the other of whom was the last man in the world any sensible human would pick out for a detective, he first went for the insides. He satisfied himself that they were none of them the one he was looking for, and so turned to the red-headed rascal on the box. Only to have a bombshell burst under his feet!"

"Yet you said—"

"And I still cling to that opinion," coldly interposed the gambler. "I don't believe Howling Jonathan is any more a detective than I am."

"But how can you explain it, then?"

"Simply enough: something deceived our spy, for I know he would not knowingly send false information. Instead of to-day, yesterday's or some earlier stage brought the detective to Good Leather!"

"Or he may still be on the way!" muttered Colonel Mallison, seeming greatly relieved to have even this indirect evidence that Howling Jonathan was not the detective he had believed him ever since that luckless encounter while his wits were muddled and his nerves so terribly shaken by the unexpected meeting with Herman Moskau.

A low, hard laugh parted the thin lips of the gambler, and there was little of consolation in his tones, as he added:

"That detective is now in Good Leather. He has been at work, too, since he has not hesitated to strike the family one heavy blow this very evening."

"What do you mean by that?" faltered Mallison, who was making a truly wretched exhibition of himself, thanks to that ugly ghost of an uglier past.

"Wait a bit," was the quiet response. "You remember I said that when I asked for Captain Clean-up, I was told he had, immediately on recovering from the shot that shattered knife-handle gave him, started for Good Leather. This was partly to give no cause for suspicion falling on him when noses should be counted in Good Leather after the tale was told of the adventure, and partly to lend us aid if we should need any to put the detective out of the way."

"Like all the rest of the family, Captain Clean-up firmly believed that red-headed cyclone was our game, and he knew that if so the part he had been forced to play when the stage was held up, would make him lose little time in dealing his blows at the rest of us. But he was in error, and now I'll tell you what I meant by saying that it might have been better if that shot had killed him instead of merely bruising."

"The detective has made his first blow, and Captain Clean-up is under arrest, ironed, guarded by men enough to make a mighty hot fight!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WIDOW WAXES CONFIDENTIAL.

COLONEL JOEL MALLISON shrunk back in his chair, his face a sickly yellow, his little eyes almost popping out of their sockets, his entire

frame shivering as with an ague-fit, the very personification of abject fear. And his words were barely articulate as he gasped:

"We're gone! He'll blow the whole business to save his own neck!"

Iceberg Dave sat with a cold, scornful smile upon his face, and now if ever before he showed how miserably low in his estimation stood the magnate of Good Leather, when viewed simply as a man according to the sporting code. And something of this appeared in his words:

"Measuring him in your own bushel, colonel, you might be pretty near right. But, thank the devil! Perry Blair is of a different breed of dogs! They may down him, but they can't wring a sound from his lips! If we had naught to dread save his tongue, we might rest easy in our little beds without losing a single wink of sleep."

"They'll pinch him until he squeals!" muttered the colonel, slowly recovering from the shock, licking his parched lips, reaching with trembling hands over to the brandy bottle.

Iceberg Dave did not hinder him this time. Perhaps he felt that the wretch would need all his strength before the end. If so, he must have given the liquor credit for doing very rapid work.

"They couldn't coax a syllable out of Perry Blair's lips against his will, though they had all the fiends in Tophet to aid them! All the same, we're not going to give them much rope. We've got to get him out of trouble, and the machine is already at work. So much for that."

"There is one other point which I want to call to your attention, Morris Grant—"

With hands that trembled so they made the neck of the decanter and the edge of the glass ring merrily together, Colonel Mallison managed to pour out a brimming tumbler of the liquor. He was just gulping it down as Iceberg Dave uttered that name, and with a start he choked and strangled, the brandy flowing from the mouth and nostrils!

The cool sport made no move, no offer to assist him, but leaned back in his seat, smiling maliciously at the effect of his words. It was a delicious treat to him, after his long and nerve-trying restraint. Until this night he had bowed down before the arrogant will of this poor coward, crushing his own manhood down with an iron hand, doing battle none the less sturdy and severe from being hidden from all eyes, known only to his own heart and—possibly one other!

It was almost like a free breath to a drowning man, this sudden outbreak, this casting off the fetters which had held him so long!

"Curse—I don't know—that name!" gasped the colonel, the words coming in pants as he could catch his breath between his paroxysms of s rantling and coughing.

"And you lie to me when you say so, Joel Mallison," was the icy-cold retort, the handsome face growing hard and even menacing. "You are the same Morris Grant who sold The Plenty mine at New Rush. I have known this almost from the day you and I first came together, but I never knew or even suspected until quite recently, your real reasons for taking another name, and trying to alter your personal appearance."

Colonel Mallison choked down his spasms, glaring at the speaker with sullen fury, mingling with terror. The shock was severe enough to partially clear his brain, and bring back a portion of his natural cunning. He saw that Iceberg Dave was not making a random charge, and he tried to cover his hasty mistake.

"Curse the liquor! it cuts like a knife! I don't know why it is one has to put up with such infernal stuff! And that name—I dropped it ages ago. What makes you bring it up, Dave?"

The cool sport laughed softly, mockingly, as he gazed at his opposite through his half-closed lids.

"Too thin, old fellow! It was the name that choked you, not the brandy! And shall I tell you why?"

Mallison growled savagely. If he could have done so without too great risk, he would have drawn a pistol and sent a bullet through that white, mocking face.

"Curse the name!"

"As others have before this, and with a good deal better cause, my dear fellow," quickly interposed Ingram.

"We were talking about setting Perry Blair free, and if we're to do him any good, it's a shame to waste time raking up the past."

"I told you work was going on, and even if it wasn't, what could we hope from you, in this condition? Drunk, unnerved, ready to choke at a mere name! Bah! old man, your squirmings are worse than useless! I came here to-night more to give you a benefit than to make a report of the work I had done. And when I take a trail, the devil himself hasn't got grip enough to tear me off, before I run it to an end!"

Hardly the cool sport now! More like a man who has cornered a long-hated enemy, whose blood he is thirsting to lap, and only held back by a fierce longing to make that punishment even more than death.

Something of this Colonel Mallison saw, though why it should be so he could not even

guess. Until this night Iceberg Dave had always treated him with respect, listening to and acting upon his suggestions with hardly the shadow of opposition.

Desperate, fearing he scarcely knew what, Mallison growled:

"What are you trying to get through you, anyhow? What have you to do with that time—what did Morris Grant ever do to you?"

"Suppose I was to say that the former partner of Morris Grant was one of my dearest friends? What if I say that I only recently learned how thoroughly you gouged the poor young fellow?"

Colonel Mallison forced a laugh, but there was precious little mirth to be detected in it.

"If any man accuses me of anything but perfect fairness in that transaction, he is a liar! I can prove it—and so can you, if you care to take the trouble to go back and ask for a glance at the papers. They are square as a die. As for Franz Moskau—bah! I'm an ass for ever listening to you, Dave Ingram!"

He sunk back in his seat with an affectation of contempt, but the cool sport opposite only laughed softly as he added:

"Ugly Dan Bennison is one of your witnesses, I suppose?"

Despite his attempt to steel his nerves, Mallison visibly flinched, and showed signs of renewed fear and rage.

"Curse him! has he dared to— Bah! You're 'way off, Ingram!"

"Then, why don't you laugh at my playing the ass?" retorted the gambler, showing the tips of his teeth in a malicious smile. "What made you start and shiver as I named Ugly Dan? Because he is dead? Did you love the two-legged angel so much? Destroying angel?"

There was a peculiar emphasis placed on the last words that were worse than a blow, and the colonel shivered anew. He tried to speak, but only a low, inarticulate sound came up in his parched throat. One hand rose to his forehead, where the great veins were throbbing and turning purple. A friend would have grown alarmed at the spectacle, but Iceberg Dave seemed to hugely enjoy it after his fashion.

"Dead—laid out so suddenly that not a word or a sound escaped his lips, old fellow! So sure and slick that I even doubt if his mind had time to go back to the time when he tortured poor Franz Moskau at your bidding, until the lad had to yield."

"A lie—I never—"

Iceberg Dave leaned across the table and lightly tapped the livid lips with the back of his hand. It could scarcely be called a blow, but it served the double purpose of checking that incoherent denial and gratifying the deadly hatred which David Ingram for the first time permitted himself to exhibit toward his partner in The Mint.

"I fear you will injure your voice, my dear sir," he said, softly, almost purringly, his words and tone in startling contrast to his action. "You are still suffering from that unfortunate choking spell—may you never know a more serious one! Yet men have been hanged for much less than Franz Moskau accuses you of, dear fellow!"

No answer, but the face grew redder, the veins stood out more prominently, the breath came heavier and shorter.

Iceberg Dave smiled more openly, his white hands rubbing together as though he decidedly enjoyed the ugly sight. Truly, his cause for hatred must be great, else his usual nature would never have undergone such a complete transformation! Until that night, Iceberg Dave had ever met his enemies openly, with blows instead of word-stabs.

"You don't ask how Ugly Dan took the express over the range, but I know you must be curious to hear it all. Why not? Did he not serve you faithfully in the days when you were Morris Grant?"

Still no reply. Only for the red glow in the bloodshot eyes, the stertorous breathing, Colonel Joel Mallison might well have been a corpse.

"He was stabbed to the heart by a wild-looking fellow in rags, who started up like some black ghost of the past—and perhaps he was!"

"You know Frank Spartan? You know how bad stuck he is on the girl who came to My House to-day with the widow? The daughter of Herman Moskau, the blind fiddler, I mean. You know, possibly, that Frank has sworn to find Franz Moskau, alive or dead."

"Well, Frank was standing close by when this ghost struck Ugly Dan down, and risked his life to save him from those who wanted to lynch the ragamuffin for downing Dan. Why? Because he recognized the man he was searching for—he called the fellow Franz Moskau!"

Swift and penetrating came these concluding words, and they were sharp, bitter, menacing enough to pierce the sort of stupor which apparently enchaind the colonel. He started to his feet, clasping his temples with both hands, gasping, panting—then flung out his hands and fell like a dead man!

Active as a cat, Iceberg Dave leaped forward and caught him, holding him long enough to guard against the shock startling the house,

then suffering him to rest at full length on the floor.

"You deal your blows mighty hard when you do hit, David!" came a clear, musical voice that caused the gambler to spring erect, his face flushing hotly, his eyes aglow, a cry of astonishment passing his lips as he confronted widow Mercy Watkins.

She laughed softly as he involuntarily glanced toward the door, in which he had deftly turned the key on entering.

"An angel or a fairy has little need of anything so material, my dear friend," she uttered, half-mockingly, as she gingerly held back her skirts as she stooped a little to gain a better view of the stricken man's face.

"You heard, then?" muttered Iceberg Dave, scarce knowing what he said, so completely had he been taken by surprise.

"A touch of apoplexy, I fancy!" muttered the widow, then rising erect with a soft laugh. "Well, if one will feed and drink like a hog, one must expect something of the sort."

"I'll go for the doctor."

"It's hardly worth while, David, I think. What is to be, will be, you know. And then, I hardly think there is any particular danger. It looks to me more like a case of brandy. We'll put him on the bed, and let him sleep it off."

There was an indifference in her tones that was little better than brutality, and in his ordinary state of mind Iceberg Dave would have felt a degree of repulsion for a woman who could give frank utterance to such a speech. But now his brain seemed in a whirl such as he had never experienced before. He hated this man. He loved this woman with a passion that was little short of insanity.

In silence he lifted the colonel in his arms and placed him on the bed. He loosened his collar and garments generally, without a word preventing widow Watkins from touching him. She made no second attempt, but stood quietly by, a peculiar light in her downcast eyes. And when the gambler had done all he could for the comfort of the stricken man, she lightly touched his arm, saying:

"You stayed so long, David, that I grew impatient and came to seek you, as I hinted just before we parted down-stairs. And now he is well fixed, please to bear me company."

Mechanically the gambler turned toward the door, but with a short, low laugh, the widow checked him.

"You know what we were to each other—that man and I," she said, smilingly. "So one more secret will not shock you beyond recovery, I hope."

She led him to the rear wall and touched the secret spring by which the hidden door opened. A dark, narrow passage was revealed.

"You are light-footed, and there are a few of the boarders in the house, so I fancy there is no danger of our being mistaken for rats!" she laughed, taking his arm and stepping inside. "You are not afraid?"

"With you?"

An hour's speech could say no more than those two words uttered in the tone he gave them. The widow gave his arm a grateful squeeze, then said:

"Touch my shoulder, or take a curl as tows-ropes, if that likes you better, my gallant knight. A light might betray more than I care to have the whole world know, though I am trusting you so blindly!"

"You shall never regret it, Mercy!"

In silence she led the way along the narrow, dark and crooked passage, finally opening another door which led into her chamber!

Iceberg Dave accepted the chair she offered him, without a word. As he had for many long months, he was holding down that fierce passion with a desperate grip, fearing to give it any play, lest it escape his control and bring ruin upon his own head. For, so all-absorbing was his love that he never, even in his wildest dreams, for a moment believed it could ever be returned.

One glance into his sternly composed face appeared to decide the widow as to her own line of conduct, and taking another chair, she at once broached her subject.

"After what you have seen, Mr. Ingram, you will not be surprised to learn that I have been listening to nearly all you and the colonel said in his rooms. I had my reasons for so acting, and as I have resolved to not only trust but to ask an immense favor of you, it is only right that you should know my reasons."

"Only if you prefer to give them, Mrs. Watkins," was the steady response. "I will serve you just as blindly without them."

"I know it, David, and that is one reason why I prefer to be perfectly frank with you, even at the risk of losing your—your respect."

"That you can never do, though you committed all the crimes in the decalogue!" was the swift, passionate response.

"I thank you now—some day I may do more," was the quiet answer, the brown eyes meeting his gray orbs with a glowing gaze that sent the hot blood thrilling through his veins. "Now—to business!"

"I believe you know that, years ago, I was

connected with Frank Spartan. I was younger then, and hotter-headed. I had more fanciful notions, too; but the less said of them the better. It is enough that in time I chafed against the cool, careless insolence with which Frank treated my little outbursts, and to avenge myself I ran away from him."

"I took particular pains to leave a plain trail behind me, expecting and even hoping he would follow after. But apparently he was glad to get rid of what, until won, he had sworn the choicest treasure the world or the heavens could provide, for he never took a step to recover me. And then, when hottest against him, I accepted the offer which Joel Mallison made me, and married him."

It was a hard story for a lover to listen to, even though he had so often told himself he was as far removed from her as though they inhabited different worlds, and Iceberg Dave had to struggle hard to keep his nerves under control. But he succeeded, and sat motionless, his face cold and composed, his eyes alone betraying the emotion which was inwardly raging.

As for the widow, she made the confession without a blush or a stammer, seeming to regard it as a simple business transaction.

"All this is merely preliminary," she said, resuming. "You will soon understand why I have taken the trouble to go so far back in my story, for Frank Spartan is connected with the favor which I have determined, after much sober thought, to ask of you."

"Which is granted before you put it into words."

"I expected no less, from what I have seen of you, David, but all the same, I thank you—how sincerely, let the future tell!"

Again that hot thrill! Was this woman willfully trying her powers over him? Was she maliciously punishing him for daring to love her, even in secret?

Despite himself Iceberg Dave felt these wild thoughts flashing through his mind. Nor could he banish them at once, though he loyally endeavored to do so. It seemed like treason to the widow!

"Long ago I learned that at one time in his career, the colonel had gone under the name of Morris Grant," quietly resumed the widow. "At the time I paid little attention to the matter, but recent events have awakened an interest in it such as I could hardly make you comprehend, without a frank and ample confession—a confession such as I hate to begin—to you!"

Did she mean to drive him mad? If not, better for them both were she to steady her voice, to veil those glowing brown eyes, to place less tender emphasis on words that referred to him solely.

"Why do so, then?" he said simply. "I will do your work without asking why you want it done. Surely you can trust me?"

She shook her head with a low laugh.

"I am a woman, and you must let me have my head, or there'll be another runaway of a different sort from the first! But—business!"

"I heard of this blind fiddler and his daughter, whom report made but little less than an angel of duty and a marvel of beauty! I heard of their wanderings and of their weary searching for tidings of one Franz Moskau, but it was long before I began to connect them with that secret page in the colonel's life history. In fact I paid but little attention to the matter at first, knowing how anything in the shape of woman is exalted and exaggerated by the inhabitants of a wild and woolly country like this!"

"But as time passed on, the name of my old flame, Frank Spartan, began to be connected with theirs, and then—you see, I am as frank as I promised—my interest began to grow until, when I met them this day, I resolved to learn the whole truth before I let them pass out of my sight. For that reason I dared the gun of Ugly Dan, and by your gallant aid, brought them to My House."

"I saw that my old suspicions were pretty near correct, when Joel Mallison shrunk back on meeting Herman Moskau as though he had bumped noses with a ghost! And when we were alone together, I charged him with being Morris Grant, with having cheated Franz Moskau shamefully, if he had not even killed him to the better cover over his frauds."

"Ugly Dan acted as his deputy in that affair."

"So I heard you say, a little bit ago. But Joel Mallison fears to have the whole truth come out, quite as badly as though he had killed the young fellow with his own hand."

"If there was actual murder done," slowly uttered Iceberg Dave. "If you heard what I told him, you cannot have forgotten that about the crazy fellow who killed Ugly Dan this evening at The Mint."

"Then that was no more than the truth?"

She half-rose from her seat, her eyes glowing vividly as she bent toward him, now terribly in earnest.

"That Bennison was killed by a ragged wretch who afterward swore he had to do it, because, ages ago, Dan had stolen away his brain, filling his skull with mingled fire and ice instead—yes."

"And about Frank Spartan?"

"He risked life to defend the fellow. And Headlight Harry said he heard him call him by a name which, when I mentioned Franz Moskau, he instantly recognized. I believe he thinks he has found the missing son and brother, whether he is right or not."

Widow Watkins bowed her head and covered her face with her hands. As Iceberg Dave watched, he could see her figure quivering with strong emotions. He made one move as though he would leap forward and catch her in his arms, but then fell back, his hands clinching tightly as he fought back the hot impulse.

Though he so hated and despised Joel Mallison, he could not forget that this woman was his wife.

The widow abruptly lifted her head and exclaimed:

"David Ingram, I can trust you, wholly, perfectly?"

"Put me to the test—I ask nothing better," he said, gravely.

"And you will deny me nothing? You will not shrink away from me if I speak out plainly? If so—I would kill you!"

"What you ask, I will perform. Nothing you can say or do will alter my love for you—nothing turn me from you now!"

"Even though I bid you stain your hands with blood?"

"Once more, your slightest wish is my law. Command me in all things, and may I never look into your sweet eyes again if I fail you, Mercy!"

"Then—kill Frank Spartan for me!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A STRONG MAN TEMPTED.

"I WILL—unless he kills me first."

Without a moment's hesitation came the reply, cool, distinct, leaving not even the shadow of a doubt as to the speaker's perfect sincerity. Yet that fair brow perceptibly wrinkled and the red lips compressed as though the words were not wholly pleasing.

"You spoke to Joel Mallison about setting the machine to work," the widow said, after a brief pause. "That means an attempt is going to be made to set Perry Blair free?"

Iceberg Dave bowed assent.

"And Frank Spartan has taken this crazy slayer of Dan Bennison to the same place? He will be one of the defenders, of course?"

Again the gambler inclined his head.

"Then—it could be done easily enough, and without once giving rise to suspicion—why not manage it so that the mob rubs out the fellow?" uttered the widow, leaning forward in her seat and speaking rapidly, her eyes glowing vividly.

"If it happens so, well and good," slowly responded Iceberg Dave. "It is a chance all men must run when they mix up with such affairs. And of course you know that my first duty is owing to the family. Perry Blair must be set at liberty this night, or it may be forever too late to save him. Still, if you are not willing to wait—"

"It was for your sake that I spoke, David," the widow gently murmured, flashing a quick glance into his face, then drooping her lashes.

Apparently both words and look failed of their intended effect. David Ingram grew colder and harder, at least in outward seeming, and his voice had a clear, metallic ring as he spoke again:

"Unless you plainly state that you expect me to attend to this matter instantly, without the loss of a minute, I will postpone it until after the other affair is pulled off. You know enough of the workings of the family to realize how all-important it is that Perry Blair be rescued as soon as possible?"

"I know—and expect you to do all you can to bring that to pass. It was knowing this part of your duty that made me give the hint I did, not from any doubt as to your bravery, David."

"It is enough for me to know that you wish him put out of the way. I will kill him if he don't kill me first. But I can't strike a man from behind! I can't strike without first giving him warning that I am after his scalp!"

"Not even for my sake, David? Not even to—"

Swiftly she began, only to felter, her eyes drooping after one glowing look into his big gray orbs. A hot flush came into her face. Her hands twisted together nervously. She looked the picture of sweet confusion. As though an impetuous tongue had almost hurried her into a too frank revelation.

Cool sport though he was called, and not without ample reason, when the ordinary events of a gambling and sporting life are alone considered, Iceberg Dave, shrewd, clear-witted man of the world though he had so often proved himself; in the cunning hands of this woman Iceberg Dave was but a puppet. Though she spoke to him of murder, it did not shock him. He felt that Frank Spartan had amply deserved even worse treatment. He knew her husband was living under that same roof, yet he could not think her cruel or unnatural in leaving him alone, possibly to die in that heavy fit. And when she spoke to him in this tone; when she looked at him with that glow in her eyes, he felt

his control fading away and the lava-flood of passion bursting down all barriers.

"Beware, Mercy!" he panted, hoarsely, his white face flushing deeply. "Don't trifle with me, I beg of you, or worse may come of it for us both!"

Instantly she glanced up, with that same light in her eyes, her voice soft and low:

"What do you mean, David? Surely, I have nothing to fear from you?"

Not much when set down in cold type, but enough when coming in that sweet voice, when accompanied by that look, to sweep away the last weakening barrier, and Iceberg Dave sprang forward, catching her to his breast, forcing back her head until their eyes could meet fairly.

"What, do I mean, Mercy?" he echoed, his voice low but full of a passion so intense that even her eyes were opened, though she had long known him as a secret worshiper. "I mean that I love you with all my heart and soul! That for one kiss from your lips, I would dare the hottest fires of hell itself! For one glance of love—one word of love from you, Mercy!—bah! how poor and feeble words are!" he abruptly broke off, releasing the widow and stepping back a pace, his hands behind him as though the better to resist temptation.

A slight shade passed over her fair face, and his eyes were keen enough to catch it, though he gave to it a wrong interpretation. It was not that he had said too much; she wished and expected still plainer speech.

"Am I to blame for that, David?" she uttered, softly, a half laugh parting her red-ripe lips. "Did I fall on my knees and beg of you to commit such an enormous crime as to fall in love with me?"

"It was fate, I suppose," he muttered, his brows contracting.

"And one is a fool to fight against fate, David!"

Again that glowing, almost savage light, leaped into his eyes. Once more he lifted his right hand with a warning gesture.

"That is what I meant, Mercy!" he said, trying hard to render his tones cold and even, but with only partial success. "What I meant by warning you not to rouse my wild hopes, only to laugh at and crush them down when I have performed the work you set for me. I will do it without that. I will serve you as faithfully as ever mortal man served woman, and all without even the ghost of a promise on your part. But you must not make it too hard for me. You must not throw out any false beacon for me, or—it will be worse for us both, Mercy!"

Even yet she pretended to be in doubt as to his real meaning. She uttered not a word, but there was a question in her uplifted eyes.

"I will kill you—we will die together, Mercy!" he added.

She laughed, lightly, merrily, then whispered: "Would it not be better and more agreeable to live together, Dave?"

The gambler gazed steadily into her eyes, as though trying to read the undisguised truth there. She lifted one hand with a gesture that bade him wait, and he mechanically sunk back in his chair, his face hard set, his eyes glittering, his hands tightly clinched by his side.

"You wonder how that can be, David, while I am a married woman, my husband alive and underneath this same roof! It does sound rather suspicious, and as I don't want you to form a worse opinion of me than I actually deserve—listen!"

"I told you how I charged Joel Mallison with defrauding this man Franz Moskau out of his rights in the Plenty Mine. I did more, I made him as good as acknowledge that he killed Franz Moskau the better to cover up his rascality. And then, when I had frightened the poor devil half out of his feeble, whisky-soaked wits, I sprung a bold trap on him."

"I told him what Frank Spartan had sworn, and what a reward he was working for. I made him see that sooner or later the whole truth was bound to come out, when he would have to suffer. And then I showed him one little loophole through which he might even yet escape with sound mind and an uncracked neck!"

"The prospect did not wholly please him. He balked a little at taking the leap, but with your aid in frightening the fellow, I'm open to bet that we can make him run away with and marry Amelia Moskau!"

Whatever else he might have expected, this conclusion took Iceberg Dave by surprise. He showed it in his face and eyes. The widow laughed softly, adding:

"More improbable things than that have been carried to complete success, my friend. With the aid of the family, it will not be difficult to steal the girl away without leaving any telltale traces. And then, surely she could be persuaded into marrying Joel Mallison?"

"Your husband, Mercy!"

"Now—but then?" with a soft laugh. "How long would it take to get a divorce? If necessary, to bring him to book as a bigamist? But that only if all other means failed. Who can prove our marriage besides he and I? No one! It would be easy enough to secure a divorce without publicity, by law—or death!"

"And then, Mercy?"

"After that—after Frank Spartan is dead—you say, David!"

Even yet Iceberg Dave fought back the lava-flood of passion that seemed almost bursting his brain. White in the face as a corpse, he sat motionless, not yet daring to trust himself to speak. She looked at him in surprise, the warm flush gradually fading from her face and a look that was close akin to fear coming into her large eyes. Had she made such a terrible mistake? Had this man, too, been playing a cunning part?

Iceberg Dave read something of her thoughts, and it lent him the necessary nerve to speak, cold and steady, with an undercurrent of hot and even savage passion in his tones:

"Mrs. Watkins, as you have set the example, so will I be frank and speak without the thinnest disguise. I love you. I have loved you ever since the day we first met each other. I would not own it even in my own heart, at first, for I knew that you were the wife of my partner. He told me at the outset, because—"

"Because he saw and appreciated the vast difference between you and his coarse, hoggish face and figure, no doubt!" laughed the widow.

"For that reason, in part, but more because I feared to trust myself, I avoided you whenever I could do so without openly betraying the fact. I knew that if I saw too much of you my mad passion would surely get the upper hand, and then—either Joel Mallison or I would have to go under!"

"It wouldn't be very hard to say which one would do the toes-up act," laughed the widow; but there was something in her face and eyes that showed she was far from feeling at ease.

Cold and calm though the gambler was outwardly, his tones smooth and even, she began to estimate him more correctly. Until now, she had never dreamed a man could love so wholly, so fiercely. And though it almost frightened her, she experienced a strange, glowing thrill that was as new as it was startling.

"Until now I never permitted myself even to dream that my love could be returned, much less that it would ever be rewarded by the prize for which I would be willing to dare heaven and hell combined! I never thought to speak such words to you. I would not, only for the words you have spoken this evening—only for the light I have seen in your eyes."

"Wait—hear me out," he said, his tones growing steadier as he lifted one hand with a swift motion. "I am trying to give you a faint idea of how I worship you. Words are poor things to paint it, but you may be able to guess the rest."

"If you encourage me to give way to that passion, even though you are simply playing with me, we can never go back to the old footing. You must be mine—all mine! If not—I will kill you!"

Her eyes were fully opened now. She realized that with this man love meant more than a milk-and-water sentiment. And she felt that wild thrill growing and growing until she could hardly refrain from crying out—from flinging herself upon his breast! It was strange, but none the less the truth. She was one of those women who must be taken by storm, and when once so taken, only death can change them.

With an effort she fought back that dizzy temptation, still keeping in sight her fiercely sworn vengeance.

"I am not displeased, David Ingram," she said, her tones low but her voice steady. "Any woman should be proud of inspiring such love, and I am a woman, after all!"

"Mercy?"

She quickly lifted one hand, and the gambler sunk back in his seat.

"Let me speak now. You have been frank and open; I will be the same with you, though what I have to say is terribly hard for a woman to speak in the face of a man whom she respects and whom she wishes to think well of her."

"Nothing you can say will alter my opinion of you, Mercy."

"I told you how I ran away from Frank Spartan. It was through pique, such as a warm-blooded, passionate woman will feel when she is treated like a spoiled child by one whom she loves—for I did love him then. More—that love grew stronger and more intense with each day that passed over my head while I was waiting and watching for him to follow the trail I left and beg me to return! It was growing even when I became convinced that hope was worse than vain—growing when I had to admit that Frank Spartan was glad to get rid of me! And it was never stronger than when I listened to that clumsy hog, Joel Mallison!"

Hard words, true enough; but harder for Iceberg Dave to listen to than for her lips to utter! "Through it all my love for Frank Spartan grew and stood the test of time and absence. And when I heard of his being struck with that blind beggar's daughter, I could have torn her eyes out with a hearty good will, had she crossed my path!"

"That, when I first heard the rumors connecting their names. But then I began to grow skeptical. He was a keen and swift fowler, and if he had really meant business, I felt that he

would have captured the prize long ago. And so, to learn the truth, I brought her here.

"It was not hard to pump the milk-and-water fool. She was only too ready to speak of him, when I said that he had been my friend in the days gone by. She never once suspected the truth, poor fool!"

"You know what she told me, since I've already hinted at it. But even yet I would not believe it, and when Frank Spartan brought them back to My House this evening, I took him captive, much as I did you, and had a long interview with him in the back parlor."

She paused, apparently to regain her breath, but Iceberg Dave could see that she was nerving herself to utter still harder confessions. He sat motionless, but his heart was filled with seething passions.

"I said I would be frank with you David, and I'll try to hide nothing," she added, with a short, hard laugh. "When I stood face to face with Frank Spartan, I felt my wild love fairly boiling over. Like a fool I fairly flung myself at his head, only to be coldly repulsed! I did more—I even legged that he would take pity on me—that he would forgive my folly of the past and take me away with him, to begin life over again. And he—*laughed at me!*"

"He'll never laugh again," coldly muttered the gambler.

"I told him all I had learned from Amelia Moskau, asking him if it was true. He admitted it. I made him own up that she swore she would never marry him until her father died, or until Franz Moskau was found. And then I played my last card."

"I told him that I could put him on the right track. I told him I was able to show him Morris Grant, but would do so only on one condition. I told him she was being worn out by the weary life they led, and that a few months more of the same would bring her to the grave. He admitted as much. He pretended to love her better than life, but when I offered to tell all, to put her weary search to an end by showing them Morris Grant, if he would give her up and take me away with him, he only laughed me to scorn and said the price was far too much to pay even for her precious life!"

"You have said enough—more than enough, Mercy!" muttered Iceberg Dave, rising from his seat. "When you see me again, those brutal words will be blotted out in his heart's blood!"

"Wait!" and the widow also rose erect, her brown eyes glowing, her face flushed, her breath coming quick and fast. "Wait until I have said a few words more, David. And I swear to you that they are even more true than those I have already uttered. If you doubt, look into my eyes while I am speaking. I could never tell a lie to you—*now!*"

And so, their eyes meeting, their hands clasped, she spoke on:

"Until those words were uttered, I loved—or believed I still loved—Frank Spartan. I know my mistake now. I know that I never loved him as I am capable of loving a man! But the feeling I had for him then changed all at once to deepest, bitterest, most relentless hate!"

"Are you sure, Mercy?" slowly asked Iceberg Dave.

"As sure as I am that you love me!"

He said no more, but his big gray eyes closed as though he was afraid to gaze longer into those glowing orbs.

And there was a curious little tremor in her tones as she said:

"I intended to have said more, David, but I cannot—just now. I am afraid to trust myself, and for the same reason you say you are afraid to trust yourself!"

His eyes opened, he gave a quick, painful gasp. He gazed keenly, searchingly into her eyes, but they never flinched from him now. Though she had never dreamed of such a result—though she had enlisted him as her champion to do her foul work, and brought all her cunning, trained arts into play the better to effect her purpose—the widow Mercy Watkins had never thought to reward him with more than a smile or two, a few soft words, and then drop him with a little laugh at the blind credulity of his sex.

But since that interview began, she had come to realize how a man can love, even though the object of his adoration be wholly unworthy. And before she realized her peril she was caught in the same trap she had set for Iceberg Dave.

Suddenly Iceberg Dave dropped her hands, stepping back a pace.

"I am afraid, Mercy! So much afraid that I dare not ask if what I saw in your eyes is the truth. Stop! I must not hear you say—it would be more than my nerves would stand, and I'll need them all before this night's work is done. I will go now. When I come back, you can be sure my work is done—that Frank Spartan will never again laugh at you or your prayers!"

He stepped forward and gathered her to his heart. His hot lips touched hers once, then he released her, catching up his hat, and turning the key in its lock, opening the door and vanishing before she could speak another word. She dropped into a chair, one hand pressed to her heart, her eyes swimming, her breath rapid, her voice low and glad:

"Ah, that is a man—a man to the very core! And I? Bah!" with a short laugh: "I never knew what love meant until now!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

JONATHAN PUTS UP A LITTLE JOB.

"THE pot was bubblin' over then, but now it's mighty nigh to run over it's hull bigness—I tell you."

Even as Howling Jonathan uttered those words, the little party collected in front of the stone house in which Perry Blair and the supposed Franz Moskau were confined, caught the sounds of the growing storm with a distinctness which even the least experienced one among them all could not misinterpret.

There were isolated yells, shouts, and brief, fierce outbursts, any or all of which might readily have come from a party of drinking roisterers, bent on "painting the town red," but to keen ears there was barely perceptible a low, indistinct murmuring sound joining all these together, which spoke even more clearly.

"They mean business, I'm thinking!" muttered the tall detective, his brows contracting, his voice growing hard and cold.

"Business clean up to the hankle, boss, or I hope I'm a liar!" and Howling Jonathan grinned and chuckled and smacked his lips as though he already tasted the rare feast which was being prepared for them. "Be durned if I've got any 'nother word to spit out ag'inst Good Leather. She's showin' herself the pure quill, an' chucker full o' fun then a bob-tailed cat kin play the fiddle! Good Lawd! ef my teeth don't go back onto me too soon, I'll weigh a solid ton afore the moon grows old! Come to set 'em up one by one, she hain't got so many fu'st-class chiefs, but take 'em as a lump, an' she kin shell out 'nough fightin' men fer to ration a hull army—now I tell you yes!"

"Bluffing won't take the trick, you think?"

"Not to-night, pard," promptly responded Howling Jonathan. "They've got the deck-head, an' know jest what our hand calls fer. They'll make a grip fer the hull porker, an' ef we want even the tail, we've got to shet our teeth an' hang on to it wuss than grim death to a dead sinner."

"That we'll do, though half the town comes to the front!" hardly grated Frank Spartan, thinking of Amelia and of the poor unfortunate within those walls.

"Say three-thirds, pard, an' you come heap nigher the truth," and Howling Jonathan turned toward the man.

"Let it be so—I'd fight half the world, rather than give one foot before the devils who want to lynch a crazy man!"

"Don't, pard—don't sling them out so vicious like as them, ef you ain't tryin' to make me break my neck fer takin' up the wrong side!" pathetically muttered the Holy Terror. "I come to these parts to rake in the boss fightin'-cock o' the range, an' yar I be with him on my side o' the range. Durn sech luck, anyway!"

"You can desert to the enemy just as soon as you please," shortly uttered the young man, half-suspicious of this red-haired cyclone, despite the risks he had run on that side of the matter.

"Not with my consent," quickly interposed the detective, before Howling Jonathan could answer the hasty speech. "Keep all you get, is a mighty good motto in a case of this sort, and as good a spy as you have proved yourself is not to be thrown over one's shoulder without cause."

"Don't borrry no trouble, Lengthy," grinned Hank, broadly. "I ain't so easy clucked away when they's so much fun in the air as they is this blessed night—no sir! An' I stick to the side whar they's the fewest mouths to git away with the most chuck, I do!"

"It is just a mob, or have they got a leader whose voice they will follow without stopping to argue the matter?"

"Got him—you bet! An' that's what makes me so durned sure we'll hev red-hot fun afore the sun comes up."

"Not Iceberg Dave, I hope?" and there came a grayer shade into the face of the detective, a more sober tone to his voice.

"David, fer sartin! I was gittin' skeart that he wouldn't jine in the dance, by the way he chipped in back at The Mint, but he's thar, an' he weighs a solid ten every time he hits the crowd with a word!"

"What does he advise? What line is he laying out?"

"Waal, boss," and Jonathan rubbed the rub tip of his nose with a dubious air. "You see I couldn't walk right up and shake the hull truth out o' the critter, an' yit make sure I could git back here to report on my own legs."

"But you have an idea?"

"Two, three couple of 'em, boss!" was the prompt response. "Though I couldn't be sure I latched onto the hull programme, I found out this much: 'They was goin' to take Perry Blair, fu'st. Ef you would listen to reason, as he called it, an' let go your grups without makin' too big a row, all right; you wasn't none on ye to be hurt in wind nor limb. But ef we wouldn't do that, an' sisted on kickin' up a row, why they was to take him anyway!'"

"That was his main point, then?"

"Perry Blair cums fu'st. Then, the pards of Ugly Dan could do what they durned pleased with the crazy critter. He didn't keer one way n'r t'other. He wouldn't lift a hand to hinder 'em, nor he wouldn't pull a pound weight on the rope ef it was hangin'."

"Catching comes first!" muttered Frank Spartan.

"They was some talk 'bout sendin' a depydation over here to talk the matter over afore they come in full force, but I didn't wait to take that all in. Things begun fer to smell mighty sulphury in my neighborhood—come less'n a inch o' gittin' trompled on by a lot o' roughs that set off hot-foot fer somethin' or ruther—an' I took a walk back here, to—"

His voice was growing less distinct and steady as he uttered the last sentence, his gaze being bent intently in one direction. Then, as he broke off speaking, one hand closed on the arm of the detective and crouching low in the shadows, the two men stole silently away.

With no little interest the rest of the party watched them, trying to divine what was in the wind. They could see them creeping along toward a patch of still deeper shadow, into which they entered, to be lost to view for a few minutes; long enough to awaken both doubt and apprehension in more than one breast.

"Brag is good, but Grip-tight is better to bank on!" muttered Frank Spartan to his party, with a hard, bitter cadence.

"You don't reckon they've sloped?"

"It looks like it to a man up a tree."

"If he is cross-eyed," laughed one of the detectives, catching the purport of their whisperings. "Don't you think it, pard. Davidson hasn't come all this way to grip a man and then drop all holds just because a few bernts begin to buzz about his ears. He'll give up Perry Blair—when he's dead."

Even as the man spoke, Frank Spartan saw the two figures come back from the shadow, and his doubts grew weaker, though he said nothing.

"I think I did when I didn't, an' that's what's the matter with the old man's eyes!" growled Howling Jonathan, in a tone of subdued disgust. "I could a' tuck oath I ketch'd glimp' of a sneaker out yonder, but ef I did he melted an' run so durned deep into the aird he couldn't ketch even a smell o' the warmint—not a smell!"

"Better be too careful than too careless!" quietly said Davidson, as the tall detective was named. "There isn't much to be learned by spying on us; still, I'd rather have it on our own side. And now, Mr. Spartan, if you will kindly grant us a few moments' private conversation, we'll try and decide our course of action."

"I have but one line—fight fer that peer devil in yonder as long as I can pick a trigger or handle a knife!" coldly uttered Frank.

"That of course" was the calm response. "I'm the last man on earth to counsel you differently, and I say now what is superfluous, perhaps: that I mean to defend my prisoner to the death, no matter what may be the odds brought against me."

"That settles it, then!" and Frank Spartan impulsively caught the detective's hand, with more fervor than he might have shown but for a feeling that he had done the man wrong in his thoughts.

"With me, it is business; with you, mainly sentiment, though I feel inclined to think you will fight just as hard as I or my men will when the pinch comes. I make no effort to dissuade you, though if we are not strong enough to keep the mob off, you and your friends would only add a few more victims. If it comes to the worst—if you see that all hope of standing the gang off is lost—I trust you will have nerve enough to do what will take even more courage than to stand and fight against odds to the death: I trust you will draw off and leave the rest to me and my men."

As he uttered the last words, Davidson moved back to the door, unlocked it, stepping inside with his men, and closing it behind them.

This was done so quickly and smoothly that before Frank Spartan could divine his purpose it was accomplished, and the heavy slabs only gave back a dull echo as he flung himself against them.

"I wouldn't, pard," and Jonathan Hebrew tapped the excited man on the arm, dodging a trifle as Frank Spartan wheeled upon him with a fierce curse, his right hand tightly clinched.

"What does he mean? If this is a trick of any sort—"

"Why, I'm the one to blame," frankly cut in the Holy Terror with a light laugh, that did more to check the threatened blow than any other guard he could possibly have selected. "It's a trick o' my hatchin', an' ef it don't pan out 'way up, then I'm ready fer to take the quinceconces, pard!"

"Explain, if you please, sir!"

"When you give me half a chance, I'll do it so quick it'll make your head swim all over, boss!" grinned the Howler, with a confidence that in a measure calmed the excited man. "An' then, ef it don't suit your ideas to a t-y ty, you kin begin chawin' on my ear jest as quick as you durn please. We kin hev a little fun,

anyhow, afore Iceberg an' his army comes to kick the stuffin' out o' us."

"I am waiting for your explanation, sir," was the cold retort.

"The boss thief-ketcher give a hint of it, of you only tuck notice, pard, when he said that mebbe you'd show better grit by haulin' off from a hopeless fight then stickin' to the trough, whether or no."

"You are dodging the point at issue. Get down to business."

"Gittin' thar, jest as fast as a cripple kin, pard," was the placid response. "I always did limp an' go hobblety when any one undertuck to drive me out o' my nat'ral gait. But now—I reckon you've calmed down enough to listen without jumpin' off the han'le, so here goes:

"They ain't room inside the jug fer us all. They is room fer a few, an' that few kin do the part I set fer 'em jest as well as ef they was a th'usan'. It ain't so much fightin', as it is talkin' back fer to git the critters out yender red-hot stirred up."

"I knowed you'd want to be one o' the insides, to keep watch over that crazy critter, but as I'd got better an' more 'portant work fer ye to look after on the outside, I jest give them 'ective critters the hint to make a slip of it, when you wouldn't draw off a bit to play talk it over."

"That was part of your scheme to get them inside, without me?"

Howling Jonathan nodded placidly. But as the sounds from the town came clearer and more distinct to his ears, he added more rapidly:

"Nough fer that p'int, boss. Now fer the part we're goin' to play in this little jamboree."

"You know as well's I do, that we ain't enough in weight or number to stand off the gang that Iceberg Dave is raisin'. We couldn't all git inside, an' ef we could, we couldn't fire a shot at the enemy ontel they'd bu'sted open the door. They ain't even a winder to shoot out of."

"It ain't much better out here. Ef they wanted to, an' could keep cool enough, the mob could lay low in the dark out yender, an' sweep us off without givin' us a chance, only by firin' at the fl'shes. An' it's jest somesech mean way they'll try, ef we was lucky enough to drive back thar fu'st charge. You know that, boss?"

"I know that while I live they shall never lay a hand in violence on that unfortunate man," coldly uttered Frank Spartan.

"They's only one way to keep 'em from doin' of it, an' that's the very job I want ye to help me put up on the p'izen critters!" earnestly added Howling Jonathan. "We need to be foot-free to play it. We want to be whar we kin try to bluff the critters off, but if that can't be did, an' I'm pritty sure it won't work with Iceberg Dave fer a head on the other side, we want to be whar we kin take the gang by surprise. An' ef you'll agree to play your part, we'll make Good Leather think she never hed a full-growed benefit afore—we will so!"

Louder and plainer came that dull, significant muttering: a sound that somewhat resembled the distant roaring of an angry surf breaking against a rocky shore.

"Durned ef they ain't comin', hot-foot, too!" muttered Howling Jonathan as he bent his head in listening, swiftly straightening up again and speaking rapidly: "We'll try to bluff 'em off. When that plays out, we'll give 'em the dare an' then run off—or make 'em think so, 'tanyrate. We'll dodge 'round the corner of the shanty, slip off in the shadows an' make a circumbendibus 'round ag'in to whar we kin take the durned fools in the rear. They'll hev struck the fu'st blow, an' we kin shove off onto thar shoulders all that may come of it—see?"

"Not as clear as I could wish, I confess!"

"We'll hev them right whar they hed us in the fu'st place, an' as they won't be lookin' fer us from that way, one minnit o' red-hot work sech as I reckon we kin pour in, 'll be mighty apt to sicken 'em so they'll haul off fer day to come to show 'em what's happened. An' I reckon you know how mighty tough it is to fetch a mob up to the scratch ag'in after it's once run away," hurriedly muttered the Holy Terror.

A little murmur ran through the group, and Frank Spartan felt that his friends regarded the trick with favor. He himself doubted, but even if all should not work as Howling Jonathan seemed confident it would, they would be none the worse off, and could still fight for the two men.

"They're comin', sure 'nough this time!" muttered Howling Jonathan. "You've got to take the rest on trust. Better you do the heft o' the talkin', boss. Hellow you critters!" he bawled at the top of his voice as the advancing crowd came into plainer view.

"Hello yourself!" came back the cold, clear-cut tones of Iceberg Dave, who had apparently taken command of the lynchers.

"I wouldn't come no closter, ef I was you, pard! We're holdin' a love-feast right here, an' hain't got time fer to be deesturbed by any ongodly gang as goes prowlin' 'round town this time o' night, when all decent an' honest critters is in bed an' snorin' long ago! Scat!"

"Are you the acknowledged head of that

party? If not, let your leader speak. I mean business," coldly retorted the gambler.

"Perhaps I can serve your turn, Dave Ingram," sharply uttered Frank Spartan, stepping forward a pace or two, though Howling Jonathan as promptly advanced until at his side.

"Either you or the fellow who arrested Perry Blair, my friend, on a trumped-up charge and a forged warrant."

"That is your say-so, Dave," was the cool retort.

"And my say-so is that you lie in your throat when you utter the words, Dave Ingram," came a voice so closely resembling that of Davidson, the detective, that Frank started in surprise, all the more acute from his seeing that they came from the lips of Howling Jonathan, who hurriedly whispered: "Make the boys understand that they are to follow your lead in the trick. No mistake now. Not a shot, not a blow until your voice gives them the signal. Do it quick, but make 'em see that everything depends on their blind obedience!"

While he was hastily whispering, Iceberg Dave was replying to the blunt defiance which he believed came from the detective.

"I will beg you to repeat those words after we have settled this affair, my dear sir—provided you are in fit condition, as I trust you may be. As you will be, if you are wise enough to listen to reason instead of throwing away your valuable life in attempting impossibilities!"

"Say you'll do it, man!" urged Howling Jonathan. "One single mistake now may ruin everything! Quick! I must answer that fellow!"

"I'll trust you," responded Frank Spartan, as he stepped back to pass the word to his friends.

"Are you struck dumb by the mere sound of a man's voice?" sarcastically added Good Leather's cool sport.

"Hardly, if you call that the voice of a man. I took it for the yelping of a stray cur whose tail somebody had stepped on! Beg pardon for the mistake—but, what in thunder do you fellows want, anyhow?"

"What we are able to take if you are foolish enough to withhold it, my dear sir," came the prompt response. "We want Perry Blair. We want the fellow who murdered Ugly Dan Bannison. And what we want, we're bound to have, even if we have to walk over your dead bodies to get it!"

"Without giving us a chance to get out of the way?" laughed the counterfeit Davidson. "Surely you'll give us a chance to clear the track?"

"If at once, yes. If you offer the slightest resistance, so much the worse for you, one and all!" came the stern threat.

"Give me five minutes in which to consult with my friends, and I will give you our decision."

"Granted. Make the wisest use of the time, if you love life."

Howling Jonathan stepped back and rejoined Frank Spartan, who grasped his hand in token that all was as he desired.

"They mustn't be no mistake, boys," hurriedly uttered the red-haired plotter. "You want to dodge behind the house, turn to the right, an' lay low ontel Frank gives the word. Not a move afore you see an' hear him! Then—wade in fer all you're wuth! Ready, now, an' off!"

He turned as they stole away, leaving him alone with Frank Spartan, and cried out tauntingly:

"Come an' take us—ef you kin, durn ye!"

Grasping Frank by the arm, he darted away, as Iceberg Dave gave the word to charge, leading the way himself, grasping the front rope slung to a heavy log, which was hurled against the door. A crash, and the barrier gave way—then rose a wild, thrilling yell!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HOWLER GETS DOWN TO FINE WORK.

ALTHOUGH the rest of their party had turned to the right of the stone house, Howling Jonathan half led, half forced Frank Spartan to the left, turning abruptly under cover of the shadows as the mob rushed forward with that savage yell for blood, under lead of Iceberg Dave.

Even the Terror was taken a little by surprise at this very prompt assault, which bade fair to completely frustrate the cunning plan he had formed for their discomfiture; but, instead of showing dismay or going into a flurry of excitement, the Howler chuckled grimly as he turned upon Frank and dexterously twisted him to the ground, one broad palm pressed over his lips, the other hand engaged in keeping the startled and enraged young man from drawing a weapon.

"Look an' lis'en pard," hurriedly muttered the seeming traitor, his voice full of triumph, his eyes glowing redly in the dark. "They've bu'sted open the door, an'—you hear that?"

A wild, fierce yell rising above the confused tumult. Sharp cries and some words which neither of the two men lying there on the earth

in the shadow could catch with sufficient clearness to be sure of. The swarming mob falling hastily back. And then Iceberg Dave leaping over the shattered door, his voice ringing out:

"The cunning devils have tricked us! There's no one here! There's a hole under the rear wall, through which they must have stolen away!"

"Now kin ye see through it, boss?" laughed Jonathan as he suddenly relaxed his grip and leaped to his feet.

"What for—why didn't you tell—where has he been taken?" huskily muttered Frank Spartan as he also arose.

"They've taken the first trick, but we'll come out ahead in the game, or I'll never play another this side the grave!" they could distinguish the voice of Iceberg rising above the wild tumult that followed the startling disclosure.

"Which goes to show we'll hev chances 'nough fer fightin' 'bout runnin' a-muck with that red-hot gang right now," chuckled the Terror as he caught the arm of the bewildered man and stole silently off at a tangent which would soonest bring them to the remainder of the party. "Fu'st thing's to git our fri'nds to take a little walk fer the good o' our healths. Ef they was to stan' thar groun' ontel them red-hot critters run chuck-up ag'in'st 'em, we'd hev to wade in an' see 'em through the circus, which is jest what we want most to keep shet of. Let Iceberg Dave puzzle the trick out ef he kin. It'll hold him busy ontel we kin finish stockin' the keards. Then—we'll rake in the stakes an' 'vide up the effec's 'cordin' to Hoyle—you bet!"

By this time they were far enough from the stone house, where Iceberg Dave was still haranguing his men, and near enough to the puzzled and doubting friends to attract their attention without too great danger of giving the enemy the office at the same time. Howling Jonathan held Frank Spartan motionless for a brief space while he whispered in quick and earnest tones:

"Kin you trust your fri'nds, pard! Isn't they a single one in the outfit who'd weaken at a bit of resky work? Not one that you're dubious mought try to sell ye out ef he thought he could make a big stake? Think quick an' sure! A mistake may ruin all your brightest hopes—may bring death to Franz Moskau an' undying grief to his father and sister! Answer, but only when sure!"

"I'll answer for them with my life, if necessary!"

"That's enough then, pard," with a grim chuckle as his firm grasp relaxed. "Give 'em the signal, an' let's git out o' here to whar we kin do a bit o' talkin' 'bout runnin' too much resk o' hev'in' them critters runnin' chuck up into our council."

There was scant time to spare, for already the mob at the stone house was breaking up into compact bodies which were to search for the fugitives and take them, dead or alive, if they remained within the confines of Good Leather. But fortune still favored the right, and the friends succeeded in drawing off without interruption.

"This slip-off business was what we 'lowed to play from the very fu'st, gents," hurriedly explained Howling Jonathan, "though we didn't count on takin' a crazy critter through the back door. That hole was thar, pard," turning to Frank Spartan, his eyes gleaming with subdued fun, "when you went inside. Our pard was layin' over it on his blanket, an' it was more to keep you from stumblin' onto it then from wishin' to ketch your talk with the crazy man that you wasn't left in thar alone."

"Why didn't you trust me with your plans?" sharply demanded the young man, his eyes still glowing with angry excitement.

"They wasn't time to talk it all over, an' ef they was, you wouldn't give us a chance 'way from the rest," coolly added Howling Jonathan.

"Not one of them would have betrayed your plans!"

"We didn't know it fer sure then, an' the prize was wuth too much fer us to run any more resks then we hed to, pard, an' you, gents. Look at it in a white light, an' you'll see the why and wharfore. But just now—thar's business afore us that we want to settle for sure."

"When I take oath that it will be fer your own good—when I take oath that nearly all o' what is to come in fer your happiness an' the happiness of the woman you love—when I say that we hope to rub out the my-tery that bes so long kivered Franz Moskau over with a mighty black cloud—kin I count on you an' your fri'nds kerryin' out orders without stoppin' an' argyin' them all through, from fu'st to the last one? No if's nor and's, but plain yes or no!"

Frank Spartan paused only long enough to glance over the faces of his party, then responded:

"Tell us what to do, and we will not fail you while one of us can pick trigger or play a knife. I answer for all present."

"I'm hopin' they won't be no fightin' at all," quickly replied the Howler, with an unblushing repudiation of his sanguinary record. "Ef they don't come no p'izen awk'ard slip-up, we'll hev Good Leather whar the wool's mighty short

long afore the sun comes up to show the rest what a han'ful o' airnest men kin do when they set out to spread themselves wide open!

"You'll take your men an' hold the hotel. Don't let a soul in nor a soul out, without he, she or it kin show up a pass writ by me or Mark Davidson. You want to hold the doors, but not to make any more show o' what you're doin' then you hev to. Onderstand?"

With a painful, gasping moan, Colonel Joel Mallison opened his eyes, for the first time returning to consciousness after falling in that death-like fit as Iceberg Dave flung those cruel words into his face.

For a brief space his brain was a blank, his bloodshot eyes roving slowly and aimlessly around the low ceiling, then wandering down the wall at the foot of his bed until—what was that black, grim figure doing there?

The benumbing spell was broken, and from that moment the sluggish brain of the speculator began to work, quickening under that curiosity, with which was mixed a trace of fear, that rapidly grew and grew until—with a low, shivering cry, Joel Mallison sought to spring from his bed. Only to make another discovery.

His wrists were ironed!

A cold, heavy hand closed over his lips and cut short the wild, hoarse yell of terror that rose in his throat as he made this discovery. Strong hands held him back on the bed until his mad, yet feeble, struggle ceased.

The dark figure at the foot of his bed threw back the cloth that had hidden its features. A lamp was turned up until the small room was flooded with light, and even his terror-dimmed eyes could not mistake that face for other than the one belonging to the Terror from Headwaters!

"Hellow, kunnell! woke up at last?" came in a cheery tone, and a broad smile lit up that red and homely face. "Be durned ef I didn't begin to think you'd cheated the rope an' dodged over the dark river without waitin' fer the proper passport! I did so!"

"Mercy!" gasped the craven wretch, now that retribution seemed to have fairly overtaken him, showing himself in his true colors.

"Gobs an' heaps of it, boss!" grinned the red-haired detective, as he leaned over the foot-rail and fixed his eyes steadily upon the livid face lying so helplessly back on the pillow. "All that's wanted is to fust find out jest how much mercy it'll take to wipe out the past an' kiver up your devil-doin's. To find that out fer a surety, suppose you'n me go back a little an' rake the dust off'n some o' your dirty didoes? Ef I git off o' the straight trail, don't let your modesty prevent you from correctin' me. It's the dead-sure truth we want to git at jest now, boss!"

That strong hand was clapped over his lips again as he sought to shout aloud in hopes of bringing aid to save him from that grinning demon whose eyes seemed to burn a hole through his skin wherever they rested for a moment.

A cold, snake-like rope was flung across his throat; the two ends were drawn taut by hands the owners of which he could not see. The hand was removed, and the Terror spoke on, his tones as even and calm as though no interruption had occurred, as though he was engaged in the mildest, most agreeable of conversations.

"They was a time when Morris Grant was 'most as big a man in New Rush as Kunnell Joel Mallison was in Good Leather, up to to-night. He had a half-interest into the big mine, The Plenty. He could sell out any day fer enough ducats to make a 'pendent fortin fer any man that wasn't a hog, but neither he nor his pardner, Franz Moskau, was willin' to do that just then. They had a bonanza, so they thought. It would pay better fer to work it thar own selves. An' many's the time they swore they would."

"But then they come a change. Morris Grant, the more he thought it over, the more he felt that what was a good thing fer two, would be jest double as good a thing fer one. An' so, forgettin' that ef it hedn't bin fer Franz Moskau, who furnished the money to find the mine an' develop it enough to make it wu'th so much, he would still be a pore, no-count, broken down prospector, too poor to pay fer a drink of whisky or to buy a single meal, this Morris Grant began to plot an' plan murder!"

"You kin winch an' squarm, kunnell, but that's jest what it was," coldly added the Howler, as the wretch on the bed shivered all over and shrunk back as he heard those words. "You've hed your dance, an' now you've got to pay the fiddler."

"Your pardner was too white himself to even dream o' sech black treachery as filled your base heart, an' he tumbled into the trap you sot fer him without much trouble. An' then, you sot to work to break him down, to tortur' the pore devil ontel he come to the farms you set afore him—even then lyin' as only sech dirty whelps as you kin lie fer to gain thar ends!"

"You only tuck one man into your confidence, but you paid him so well fer his help that he was enough. That man was Ugly Dan Bennisson, an' bein' a nat'ral-born devil, without heart or conscience, lovin' evil fer evil's own sake, you

couldn't 'a' picked a better tool fer the work ef you hed raked the world over.

"Nobody see'd Franz Moskau leave New Rush, but when you told 'em he hed tuck a trip back East to visit his 'lations, you was thought so well of in town that nobody ever thought to ax any questions. An' then when you come out an' showed the papers that made over to you the mine fer value received, it was looked on as all right, an' a lucky bit o' business fer you. Nobody ever dreamed what horrible tortur' hed bin brought into play to git the signature of your old pardner. Why should they? Wasn't you a honest man? Hedn't you bin open an' frank as day?"

"But 'way back thar in the hills was a dark, damp, gloomy hole in the rocks that mought 'a' told a different tale, ef its wall could only speak human talk! An' those black walls hev spoken, Morris Grant! They hev give up thar secrets at last, an' sent me to tell you that the day o' jedgment is come at last!"

Jonathan paused abruptly, not because he was through, but with a frightful contortion of features, Colonel Joel Mallison seemed on the point of giving up the ghost.

There were rapid movements and hurried whisperings in the room for a few moments. There was the smell of strong liquors, and there was the taste of brandy in his mouth as Joel Mallison once more opened his eyes, weak but living, growing stronger with the passage of each moment.

Once more that snake-like pressure crossed his throat. Once more his accuser leaned on the foot-board, his glowing gaze holding that of the trembling, cowering wretch as with the fabled fascination of the rattlesnake. Once more those cold, measured tones, tearing the veil from the black and criminal past!

If his sins had been great, so were his sufferings just now. He was broken down by the shock he had received that day in so unexpectedly meeting Herman Moskau, by the scare which the Howler had given him, followed up so closely by the still greater shock dealt out to him by Iceberg Dave. Alone and uncared-for he had lain in that death-like stupor until awakened to this—to realize that all was indeed lost! That the black past had come to light, and vengeance had claimed him for its own!

Truly, Joel Mallison was reaping his just reward!

"Ugly Dan told you that he'd bring the young feller to taw in a monstrous short time, once he got him out whar there wouldn't be no curious critters to ax what so much row an' rumpus meant. An' he didn't waste his time, nuther. It was a work o' love to him, though this poor young feller hadn't never done him no harm. A devil born, cruelty an' Injun-work come nat'ral to his hand. But he found that it wasn't so quick a job. He found that Franz Moskau hed a will like iron, a narve sech as not one man in a thousand kin boast of 'thout tellin' a lie!"

"Fer days an' weeks he kep' up his devilish work, afeard to crowd too much in one day, lest he beat your game by killin' the lad instead o' bendin' him. An' as he found how stiddy the lad held out, despite the tortur' which was enough to drive any man crazy, he come to hate the poor boy like he had done him some turrible injury! An' so, even when the work was done—when Franz Moskau, broken down in body an' sperit, signed all the papers you hed prepared fer him, Ugly Dan lied to you when he swore he'd kill the poor boy as soon's you got out o' sight. He meant to kill him, but not at a single blow. That would not kill the devilish hatred which he now felt fer Franz Moskau. Only tortur' could do that!"

"You went back to New Rush, an' after the right 'mount o' talkin' to pave the way, you showed your papers as proof o' your words. You said that your pardner hed come on a gal back home an' fell in love with her so mighty bad that he would marry her off-hand, though she swore she would never hev him onless he'd agree to settle down with her folks an' let mines an' minin' alone."

"The only resk you run was in talkin' too much, but you maniged to steer clear o' that, an' sold The Plenty fer a pile big enough to fit in well with your say-so that you was goin' back East to settle down an' 'joy life."

"Better fer you ef you'd done it, kunnell! A man kin hide so much better in a crowded kentry then he kin out here. You mought 'a' bin foot-free an' full o' deviltry even yit ef you'd bin content with what you'd stole; but you wanted still more. You wanted to be one o' the few mighty rich men in the world, an' so turned up another trick that hes brought yer to the foot o' the gallows!"

"You changed your name an' come here, livin' a lie in more senses than one. You brung a woman an' sot her up in business as a widder, when she was your wife. You thought it a high old joke on Good Leather, but that joke has turned onto you, now!"

"By your talks with the widow, the hull truth hes come out. Ef you want to know how, thank that cunnin' passage you hed built from this room to the one she uses. An' not the least part to this tough-lookin' little spy!"

As he spoke, the boy of all work popped up be-

fore the colonel's eyes, grinned significantly, then dodged out of sight again.

"Through that kid we l'arnt all the secrets o' Cap'n Clean-up an' his gang. Thanks to him we tuck Perry Blair, alias Cap'n Clean-up. We hev pinned every man o' the gang, an' then we come here to give you a fust-class benefit."

"But Franz Moskau? Was it a ghost that killed Ugly Dan? Is them the questions I kin see bubblin' up in the pretty two eyes of ye, kunnell?" grinned the Howler, evidently hugely enjoying his part in this general unmasking. "Listen, kunnell, an' I'll give you still another look into the pinny-poppy-show!"

His gleaming eyes raised and glanced past the head of the bed. And Joel Mallison shivered anew as he could detect a stealthy tramping to and fro beyond his ken. He scarcely knew what it was he dreaded, for his brain was all in a whirl, but he felt that a fresh and still more terrible shock awaited him.

Slowly two dark figures moved within his limited range of vision, pausing near the foot of the bed, where Jonathan was still standing.

In one of the forms he recognized Frank Spartan, his face pale and hard-set, his dark eyes glittering with stern vengeance.

But the other? Its head was covered with a dark cloth that fell over its shoulders, concealing all from his view. Under that veil? What was coming? Was it the ghost he had seen so often of late?

"Look straight this way, kunnell," said the Terror, as his hand touched the black cloth. "Low me to interduce to ye a old-time fri'nd an' pardner, Franz Moskau!"

He snatched the cloth off, revealing a pale, thin, deeply lined face—a face that might have belonged to a corpse, only for the wild fire that glowed and gleamed in those deep-sunken eyes. The face of the madman whose steel had cleft the heart of Ugly Dan. But the knife and shears had been at work, clipping and shaving until a ghost of the past indeed stood revealed to the horror-stricken eyes of the criminal.

"Franz Moskau!" he gasped, shrinking back, shivering from head to foot with abject terror.

CHAPTER XX.

"MUSIC HATH CHARMS."

THAT was a night never to be forgotten in the annals of Good Leather. Surprise followed surprise with a rapidity that caused the coolest and steadiest brain to whirl and become confused in the attempt to keep the run of matters in general.

Even the cool sport, Iceberg Dave, was taken aback by the cunning job put up on the lynching party by Howling Jonathan Hebrew, and for a little space he fairly lost his head. He was playing for the heaviest stake of all his life. He was still unnerved by the fierce struggle he had had to keep his mad passions in check while in the presence of widow Mercy Watkins. He was constantly hearing the words she uttered, ever recalling those glowing looks, the intoxicating truth which he believed he had read in the depths of her brown eyes. And thus it came about that he lost control of the mob in losing control of himself.

After the first blind rush after the vanished prey, the compact bodies broke up and swept through the town, without a head, since Iceberg Dave had vanished, looking for Frank Spartan.

And as the demoralized mob carried more than one bar by storm, pouring in liquor until their wits cozed out, it came that one after another man was arrested and ironed by the cool-headed, iron-nerved detectives under the lead of Mark Davidson.

All this was done so quietly and adroitly that not a soul save those more immediately concerned even suspected what was going on under cover of night, until it was too late to effect either rescue or turn upon the bloodhounds of the law.

One by one, until all of the band of Captain Clean-up, save Colonel Joel Mallison and Iceberg Dave, were taken into custody, placed in the stone-walled cellar beneath My House, where a few of the friends and allies of Frank Spartan guarded them vigilantly.

Even widow Mercy Watkins was taken in charge as she attempted escape by way of the secret passage. But somehow she managed to effect an escape, soon after Frank Spartan whispered a few guarded words to the man in whose care she was placed by Howling Jonathan.

It was not until nearly day dawn that Iceberg Dave was discovered by the officers of the law, returning on horseback from his vain search around Good Leather for the man whom he had sworn to slay as the price of the fair widow's love.

He dismounted at The Mint and entered its doors, only to have the enemy close in behind him, covering him with their pistols and ordering him to surrender in the name of the law!

He leaped back and his hands filled with revolvers, cocked and in readiness to begin their deadly work. He saw that escape was well-nigh impossible, but his white, stern face showed the detective that it would be no easy task to take him alive. And cold, stern, Davidson said:

"The jig is up, David Ingram! Every man belonging to the gang is under arrest save you. The mob you raised has melted away as the truth showed itself, and the better element of the town came to our side. You may cheat the rope; you can't cheat our weapons. So surrender!"

Even as he uttered the words, a figure forced its way through their ranks, leaping across the room and panting:

"Together, my hero—my love!"

It was widow Mercy Watkins, who had fled to the side of the one man in Good Leather who, she knew, would defend her to the last gasp.

Until then Iceberg Dave had well borne out his title, cold and unshaken as he faced those heavy odds, a smile even curling his mustaches as he listened to the stern speech of the tall detective. But now!

His left arm encircled the woman who thus proved the intense love with which he had so suddenly inspired her. His face was transfigured. One moment full of love, beyond the power of words to depict. The next that of a demon, as he glared at the detectives who were moving forward to capture him while thus hampered.

"Better death, my love!" panted the widow, and before he could divine her intention, she drew a pistol and fired straight into the faces of the enemy.

They fell back, confused, shaken far more than they would have been at the assault of a dozen men, and Iceberg Dave caught at the chance.

A stream of fire poured from his weapon as he lifted Mercy up on his left arm and rushed forward. The detectives and their allies from Good Leather reeled back, yelling, shouting, cursing, firing without an aim, split through the center by that human catapult.

And it was not only by his might and desperate nerve. Mercy Watkins added her quota to the scene of death and confusion, shooting as she lay in his arm, laughing hysterically, shrilly, encouraging her new-found hero to still more desperate deeds!

For the time being they were neither much better than lunatics!

But it was madness with a method underneath it. Iceberg knew that but one frail hope remained for them, and as he dashed through the confused tangle into the open air, a mighty sob rose in his throat as he saw his good horse still standing where he had left it.

One mighty bound and he was beside it. Another instant and Mercy Watkins filled the saddle, her pistol still sending out vicious messengers of death, covering the mounting of her hero.

Up behind her he leaped, wrenching the good horse around and thus shielding her precious life with his own body, laughing ferociously as he sent his last shot into the confused crowd, then crushing the skull of a man who leaped to the head of the horse to check their flight.

On through the streets of Good Leather dashed the horse with its double burden. Out of Good Leather and into the dark shadows that were not yet thinning before the coming day. On and on and on!

Pursuit was made, but it came to naught. Either by swift riding or cunning doubling, the fugitives eluded all pursuit, and from that day thenceforth their names were only known in Good Leather as a memory.

Once more in the back parlor of My House.

The room was well filled, though a somber silence generally reigned over the assembly.

Herman Moskau and his daughter Amelia sat near one end of the room, both very pale and bearing traces of strong agitation. Near them stood Frank Spartan, one hand gently resting on the chair of the blind minstrel, the other clasping the trembling fingers of the sister.

On a couch at the further end of the room sat, or rather crouched, Franz Moskau. His face was immobile, his eyes fixed on vacancy. He gave no signs of interest or curiosity. His mind seemed a perfect blank, and he had not spoken a word for hours. The slaying of Ugly Dan Bennisson appeared to have satisfied him.

Near him stood Howling Jonathan Hebrew, now very different in appearance from the Terror who had "shaken Good Leather up" so lively ever since his advent the evening before.

Mark Davidson, paler than ever, his head and one arm bandaged, memorials of that fierce charge at The Mint, with several other persons made up the number.

"It is time, 'Melie'" softly muttered Herman Moskau, his blind eyes roving around as though he could thus see just what was near. "It is time to play, is it not? It may make him the quicker come. You see him not, 'Melie? Franz is not yet in sight?"

"Play, father," gravely uttered Frank Spartan. "And as you play, pray that the ever merciful Father may open the ears of your long-lost son! Pray that your music may give him back to us all!"

"It is ever so I pray," was the simple reply, as

he drew the bow across the strings, sending out that long-drawn, wailing, yet inexpressibly sweet and touching sound.

More than one heart gave a quick bound of hope as they saw the crazy man lift his head with a start, gazing across the room. But only to sink again as the head drooped and he resumed his former attitude of listless apathy.

The father played on and on, tears streaming from his sightless eyes, his face upturned, bent a little to one side as though he was listening for the first footsteps of his wandering boy. Played on until his overtaken nerves could stand no more, and the instrument dropped into his lap unheeded as he murmured:

"Is it not yet, 'Melie? Is the good Lord still hard to us? Is it nothing of our poor boy that you see, yet, 'Melie?"

"Not yet—not yet, father!" came chokingly, those tear-dimmed blue eyes fixed on the pale, haggard face opposite. "Play yet a little more, father! It must be—it must be that he will his ears open! It is the last hope! If music not—then nothing!"

"Patience, my dear friends," said Frank Spartan, only by the utmost exercise of his will keeping his voice under command. "Time is long, and kind heaven will reward your efforts at last. Play some more—if you have not forgotten, play some tune that Franz loved when a happy child with you all. Try that, and God grant it may open his ears!"

A gasping cry broke from the poor old man's lips, and he turned his sightless eyes toward his daughter, crying huskily:

"It is so, 'Melie? The time has come for the old song that the poor mother make him to sleep goen? He is by us close—my boy?"

"It is time, father. It is now, or never no more in this life!"

The blind man bowed his head, tears trickling through his thin, trembling fingers. He was praying.

Amelia dropped to her knees before him, her face uplifted, her clasped hands raised on high.

Not an audible word was spoken, but the prayers that went up to the throne of the Most High were none the less ardent and eloquent.

Only one dry pair of eyes in the room. Only one unmoved face!

Silent, stolid, Franz Moskau stared at the carpet, unmoved by the pathetic scene, senseless to all that was going on for the rescue of his mind from worse than the tomb.

Herman Moskau gently took the hands of his daughter, pressing them to his lips, then over his painfully throbbing heart. Faint his voice, unsteady his words as he muttered:

"It is the time we wish and wait and pray for so long, 'Melie. Be brave, my child—like me!"

Frank Spartan turned abruptly away. That piteous attempt at drawing up the bent frame—that poor assumption of calm confidence—was more than he could bear to look upon just then.

"I am brave—I fear not, father!" and the girl's voice rung out clear and distinct, her face lighting up, her eyes filling with a light as bright and glorious as though it was truly inspired. "Play the old cradle song, and play it as though you knew more than life depended on each chord! I will sing—even as the good mother sung to Franz!"

The father seemed to gather courage from her strength. He grasped his beloved instrument with something of his old energy, and then—

Soft and low came the sweet voice of the maiden, her blue eyes riveted upon the bowed face of her brother. Like a far-away echo the violin kept time to her singing.

Soft and low at first, but gradually drawing nearer and clearer.

A gasping breath that caused a discord as Amelia saw the face of the crazy man raise and his eyes glance swiftly around. Only for a single instant did she falter, for she had cast their last frail hope on this venture. Sweeter and clearer, now, as though coming still closer sounded the music. It was not as though both singer and player were in the same room with them.

And from wandering, that vacant gaze became fixed on the face that now smiled upon him. The light deepened in his eyes which had been so blank ever since he became fully satisfied that the demon who had so mercilessly tortured him was dead. His breath came faster and less regular. One hand slowly lifted to his head, pushing back the shortened hair from his forehead, then—with a swift motion sweeping across his brow as he leant forward, his lips parted, his face slowly flushing.

Slowly the song sunk again, little by little. The maniac settled back on the couch, his breath growing more even. The wild light softened in his eyes, and his thin fingers moved as though keeping time to the music. And then, as the music and the no less sweet voice grew lower and less distinct, a smile crept over his haggard face and his head drooped toward the pillow.

Amelia touched her father on the arm and ceased singing. A silence that was painful reigned throughout the room. Franz Moskau gave a start and glanced bewilderedly around the room,

but Amelia, steadying her voice by a desperate effort of will, spoke in a low, soothing tone:

"Sleep, my fine boy! Sleep for mother, dear Franz!"

"Yes—I will sleep," slowly uttered the man, his head sinking to the pillow with a faint sigh, a languid smile playing about his thin lips. "The pain is gone, and I am so tired—good-night, mother!"

Herman Moskau started to his feet, trembling like a storm-tossed leaf, his lips parting as he caught that voice, so languid, yet so familiar to his longing ears. But before he could utter a word, Frank Spartan clapped a hand over his mouth, whispering earnestly:

"It is Franz, your long-lost son, but if you speak a word to startle him, you will lose him forever!"

"It is true, father!" softly whispered Amelia, grasping his hand. "It is so for sure! Franz has come back to us, and it was the dear moosie that bring him home again!"

And time proved her words true!

From that peaceful sleep which lasted for many long and weary hours, Franz Moskau awoke in full possession of his senses, though it was many a long month before he fully recovered from the effects of all he had undergone at the hands of Morris Grant and his unscrupulous tool, Ugly Dan Bennisson.

He could never explain how it was that he escaped from Ugly Dan. The past was a blank, and far too painful to be needlessly stirred up.

Morris Grant never fully recovered from the shocks of that night. He was forced to make ample restitution to his former partner, and then was taken away to answer to the charge of highway robbery and murder, with Perry Blair and the remainder of the gang who had cursed the country under the name of "Captain Clean-up" and his band. It is quite enough to add here that they received suitable punishment for their crimes, with the exception of Morris Grant, or Colonel Joel Mallison.

He died in prison, before trial, of apoplexy, brought on, his mates said, by his wild fancy that a ghost was haunting him!

Frank Spartan married Amelia Moskau, and neither of them ever has seen cause to regret so acting. Herman and Franz Moskau live with them in the old home from whence the twain set out on their long and weary search for the missing son and brother.

And, is it necessary to add, music is king in that home!

THE END.

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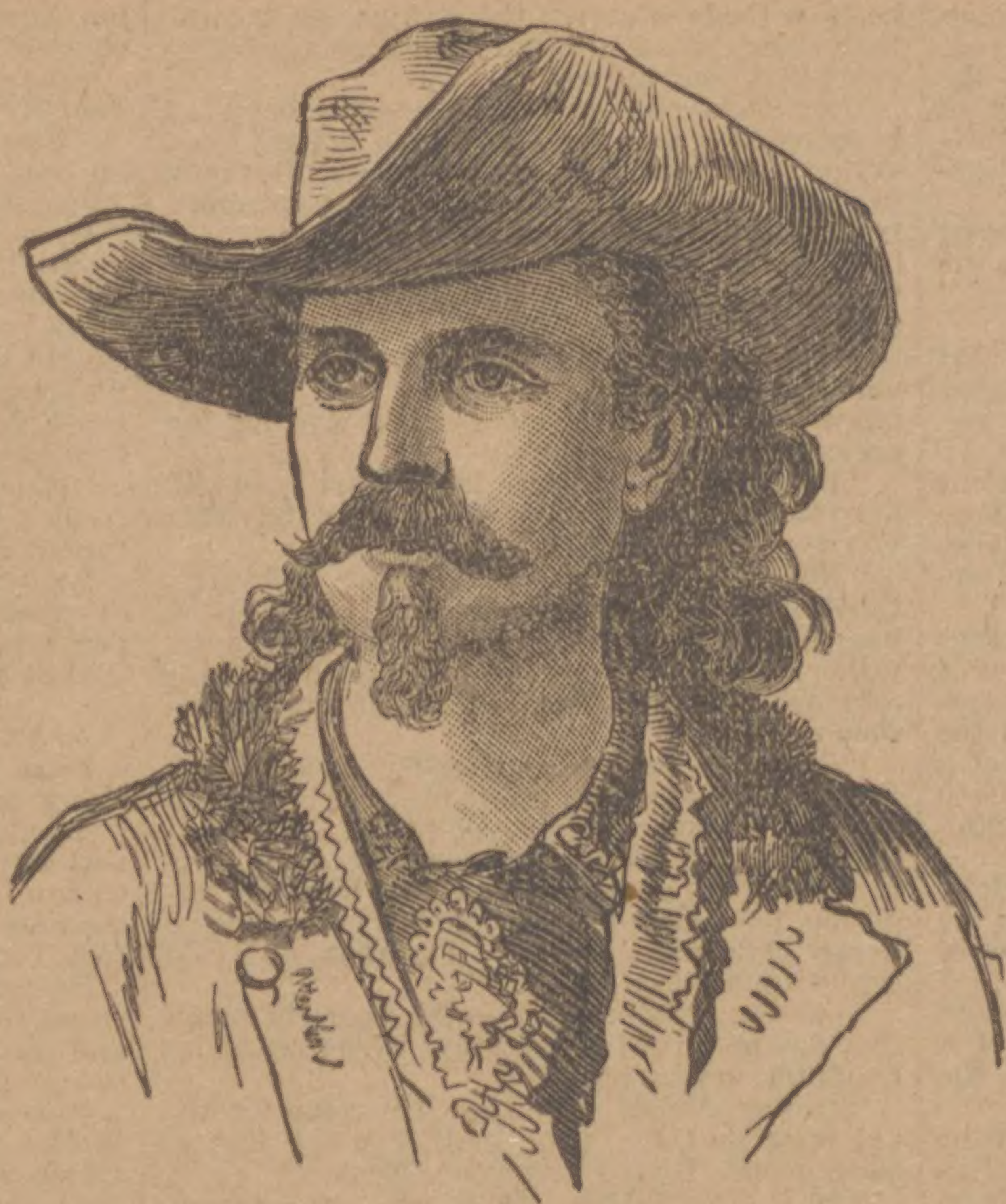
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